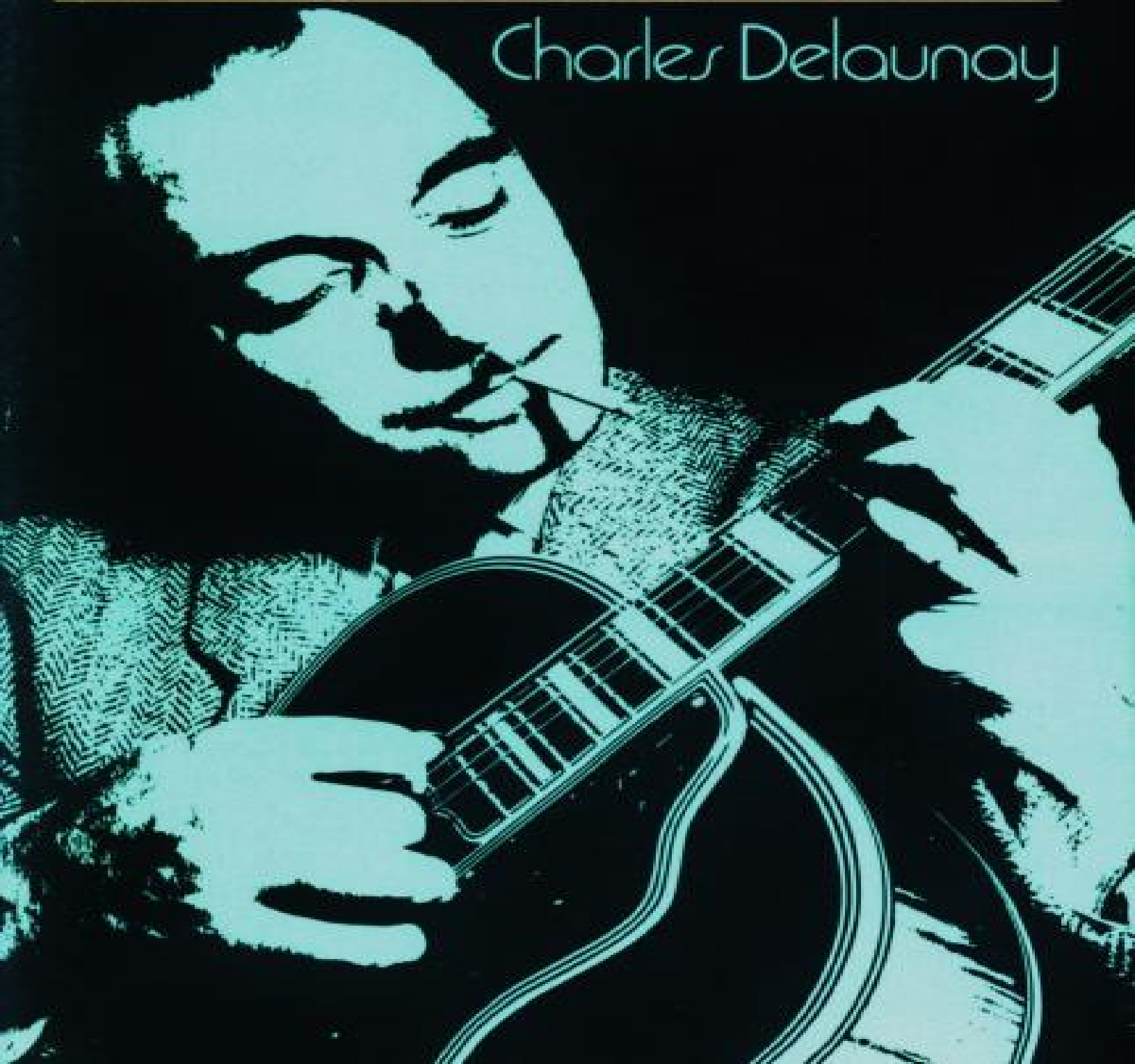

DIANGO

REINHARDT

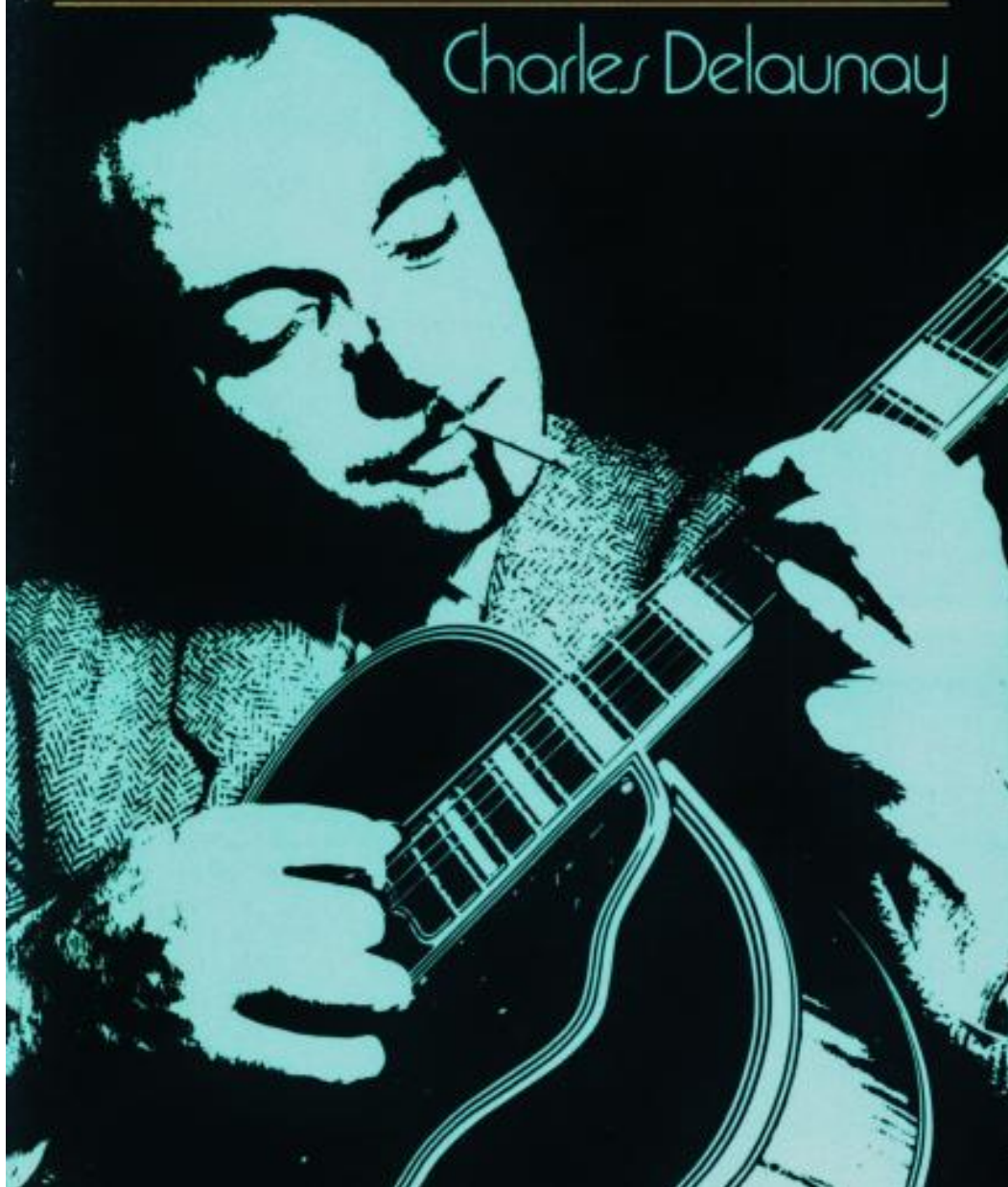
Charles Delaunay



DIANGO

REINHARDT

Charles Delaunay



Charles Delaunay

France

Django Reinhardt

1961, EN, 57757 words

No European jazz musician has so enchanted the word as Django Reinhardt, the gypsy guitarist whose recording with Stephane Grappelly and the Hot Club of France have meant 'The Thirties' to several generations of listeners, influencing musicians as far afield as Larry Coryell, Leon Redbone, Eddy Lang, and Charlie Christian. This is the only full-length study of Django ever published in English, an unforgettable portrait of a wild and independent figure who never learned to read or write (friends forged his autographs), exasperated those people who lived by schedules, gambled away a week's salary in a night, but who played the guitar like no one before or since. The distinguished French critic Charles Delaunay, who knows more about Django than anyone alive, here provides not only the familiar outline of a life – the childhood travels in gypsy caravans, the fire that left Django with a crippled hand, the legendary temper and generosity – but he also collected scores of anecdotes about the sensitivity and musical gifts that were the basis for Django's appearance as a character in Jean Cocteau's *Les Enfants Terribles*. Who else but Django could charm his way out of a jail sentence by serenading the police officer with his guitar? The comprehensive discography at the back of the book completes Delaunay's picture of this 'misrepresented and fantastic creature, at once so captivating and so divorced from the contentions of his age.'

Foreword

Shortly after Django Reinhardt's death I published a small collection of personal memories and anecdotes I had made a mental note of during the many years I knew this remarkable performer. The booklet was very soon out of print; instead of being forgotten, the name of Django Reinhardt continued from that day onwards to become better known. During his lifetime he was regarded as an exceptional figure, and the imagination of certain unscrupulous journalists (most of whom had never known him) led them to substitute a spurious legend for the real one, far more extraordinary in its way, which was none other than the everyday life of the artist.

The aim of this book, therefore, is faithfully to reconstruct the career of the famous wandering guitarist, by means of the very persons who lived and worked with him: his relatives and the musicians who knew him best. During the many months I devoted to my researches I felt it incumbent upon me to appeal to everyone's memory, comparing and checking the various accounts and even visiting libraries to consult the magazines and newspapers of the period in order to verify events that people could not always remember with certainty. If the task was considerable, and in more ways than one recalled the time-honoured methods of criminal investigation, it was made absorbing by the interest the subject held for me and the goodwill I met at everybody's hands.

This book, then, is not the fanciful tale which would have tempted any writer, but the unvarnished account, straight from the mouths of the artist's acquaintances. These people, I feel, will reveal the man in his truest, most human and most poetic light, too, and will allow the reader to form his own idea of this misrepresented and fantastic character, at once so captivating and so divorced from the conventions of his age.

Charles Delaunay

1

The Man

Django was an exceptional person. From his earliest youth he stood out from his fellows by virtue of a natural beauty and nobility which won him the respect and veneration that are the birthright of chiefs. Taller than most French-speaking gipsies,↓ with wide shoulders – only with the passage of years did his back become bent – his whole figure gave the impression of contained power.

≡ *Manouches* in the text (translator). The French language distinguishes between *Manouches*, French-speaking gipsies; *Romanis*, who speak Italian; *Gitans*, who speak Spanish; and the Central European *Bohemian*, who generally speak a sort of German dialect.

He enjoyed no mean physical strength, a natural strength which he owed to the active outdoor existence of his youth, when his caravan was always on the move.

He had a liking for broad-brimmed hats, generally light in colour, which threw his swarthy complexion into relief and drew attention to his almond-shaped eyes, with their pupils that glowed fiercely like embers in the night. A narrow moustache – by now legendary – put the finishing touch to his well-formed countenance.

Although he was born in poverty, Django had the soul of a nobleman. He felt an instinctive affection for elegance. Whilst this, I suppose, was a basic trait in his character it asserted itself only by degrees, for gipsy life offers little scope to such a taste. ‘I shall never forget,’ Stéphane Grappelly reminds us, ‘the first day Django put on evening dress – with bright red socks. It took some time to explain, without injuring his feelings, that red socks were not the right thing. Django insisted that he liked it that way, because red looked so well with black.’↓

≡ Stéphane Grappelly, the *Melody Maker*, March 6, 1954.

Sometimes he would appear dressed with great care, in a suit from the best tailor, a silk shirt and a silk tie, the image of some West End dandy.

The afternoon, however, would find him sporting a pullover and baggy corduroy trousers, top-boots and round his neck a many-hued scarf which spoke all too eloquently of the enthusiasm the gipsies feel for brightly coloured silks. He would lounge about the streets of Montmartre, pausing to chat on the café forecourts, ever on the lookout for a game of billiards or poker with the layabouts of the neighbourhood.

Despite the grave shortcomings of his education – he never really learnt how to write – his natural ease of manner and aristocratic bearing meant that he was never out of place in polite society, where he knew how to be sophisticated, sometimes gallant and often witty. It is in this lack of education and, above all, of culture, that we must look for the explanation of a life which hinges upon legend, one whose events seem hopelessly incoherent. Until he was twenty, Django had never worn a proper suit; he had never lived in a house; he had stayed a typically primitive, medieval gipsy, whose archaic beliefs, superstitions and mistrust of the ‘benefits of science’ are reminiscent of the mentality of the peasants who fled in terror at the approach of the first railway trains. Brought up as he was in his caravan, on the fringe of modern life, at the very gates of a big city, who can imagine what it meant for him and his family to leave their clan and settle in a ‘house’? M. Savitry, who was responsible for this event, tells how, in the space of a few weeks, the whole gipsy tribe of the outer Paris suburbs was roaming round his new dwelling, intent on assuring themselves with their own eyes that their brother had not been kidnapped or otherwise mistreated, that he really was not locked up. Skirting the walls, like conspirators they cast terrified glances about them, and curiosity alone gave them the courage to face so great a trial. For it is not so long ago that gipsies used to carry off little children; and if townsfolk have forgotten this, the story is still repeated to terrorize naughty toddlers wherever their caravans are to be found.

This anecdote shows better than any description just how undeveloped these people have remained; living on the outskirts of our large modern cities, they have nonetheless jealously preserved their way of life and their beliefs. It also makes it easier to understand what kind of a man was Django Reinhardt in 1953 when, all of a sudden, success was to transplant him into a world so different from the one into which he had been born. This change of fortune also meant that Django broke away from the Oriental traditions which prescribe that man should never work, and, far from having to earn

money, should take care only to spend it; and which decree that woman instead should toil, priding herself only on possessing a man who is well-dressed, leisured and the cynosure of every eye.

This flirtation with the West, as it might be called, caused no little concern amongst the Romany tribe, which saw one of its flock straying amidst the 'peasants'. (For this is how the gipsies, with all the contempt that is usually reserved for a lower caste – looking upon themselves as essentially superior – describe everyone who is not of their race.) It would certainly seem to be in this critical schism that we must look for the explanation of the contradictions and bewildering actions that characterize the life of this amazing artist.

Had he been brought up in a town, had he gone to school and thus familiarized himself with the mysteries of modern life, perhaps he would have lost the purity and plenitude of his inventive gifts. Yet how can we conceive of him other than as a musician? And how can we doubt that, better equipped to reflect on his art, he would have worked as a composer to create an even more exceptional body of music? Yet it is very hard to imagine Django divorced from his environment. Despite the change in their mode of living, Django and his wife stayed gipsies to the core. Whether it was a hotel room or the most luxurious mansion their residence was swiftly transformed into a camping-ground. Everything was turned upside down, as though they were set on recreating the atmosphere of the caravan they had known from birth. Only then did they really feel at home. Once the oil-stove had been set down on a chair, one or two kitchen utensils left lying about and a few photographs pinned up on the walls, the easy-going couple felt ready to welcome the swarm of 'cousins' and other shady characters who quickly invaded their new abode.

The same is true of Django's brother-in-law; the first time he took a hotel room he found it impossible to get off to sleep unless he left the tap running, used as he was to sleeping on the banks of streams. Once Django and his wife were established, disreputable figures were to be seen sidling up and down the stairs at any time of the day and night, and camping for hours on end in the common living-room, to the consternation of the neighbours. On innumerable occasions, in some furnished room or other in Montmartre, Django was to be found lolling on his bed, presiding over gatherings of gipsies of all kinds, some of whom were perched on the bed,

others squatting on the floor, all of them endlessly smoking and drinking, as decreed by the time-honoured laws of hospitality.

Django's affection for his caravan and the open road never left him. Subject to whim and fancy as he was, the most trifling upset afforded him a pretext for one escapade after another. After twenty years of a comparatively settled existence, he was still capable of taking to the road once again. When that happened he was away for months: those who had been rash enough to take on the management of his business affairs were left high and dry.



Though infinitely proud, as is the way with those of his race, Django often seemed transfixed by a sort of shyness which sometimes bordered on an inferiority complex, and made him appear wilfully boyish, but this was no more than a screen for his natural reticence. In point of fact, Django was a child at heart, gentle, frank and good, forever rapt in wonderment at life's spectacle, amusing himself with the most naive of games. I say games; but I might say gaming too. For gambling was Django's weakness, even his vice. Over and above his physical strength, he was endowed with prodigious dexterity. He could do anything with his fingers: his unusual nervous co-ordination made him an adroit performer at every game of skill. He excelled at every contest from throwing stones to playing billiards, and could even hold his own with the most esteemed champions of the 'trois bandes'.↓

≡ A very complex form of French billiards.

But gambling entails more than skill. Risk and the lure of profit alike had an irresistible attraction for our hero, and the most diverse games served as pretexts for wagers. His preference went to games of chance rather than games of skill, and the higher the stakes the greater his enjoyment. What fortunes he threw away in casinos, in clubs, in the most squalid dives! It is often the gambler we come up against in Django's character when we probe beneath the image of the born musician. Deprived in part of the use of his lingers – presently we shall see how the accident occurred – but endowed with both unusual strength and skill, he seems to have looked upon this semi-infirmity as a setback which he must stubbornly persist in overcoming, just as one persists, even when losing, in a game of chance. This led him to renew the guitar's harmonic system completely, enriching it in the process.

As a gipsy, moreover, Django was used to rising above adversity. Passionate, flying into a temper at the merest trifle, he had grown calm in the face of tragedy. Thus it was that he seized upon every possible means to intensify the expression of his feelings in music. 'He acquired amazing dexterity with those first two fingers, but that didn't mean he never employed the others. He learned to grip the guitar with his little finger on the E string and the next finger on the B. That accounts for some of those chord progressions which Django was probably the first to perform on the guitar...at least in the jazz idiom.' ↓

≡ Stéphane Grappelly, the *Melody Maker*, March 13, 1954.

Raised above the common condition and having fabulous sums at his disposal, sufficient to allow him to lead a life of luxury, he was condemned by his vice to live according to the whims of fortune, sometimes in opulence, sometimes in poverty. Money, the modern deity, had not the significance for Django that our society attaches to it. He had little difficulty in making it and even less in spending it. Although the soul of moderation (he always ate simply, without wasting a crumb), his aristocratic instinct led him to issue invitations without reckoning the cost. He always kept open house, however humble the prospective guest, and often champagne flowed freely at his table. Parsimony was utterly foreign to his generous nature, and however ample his resources at times were, his gifts always outstripped them. Furthermore, having no clear idea of the value of money, he was continually demanding preposterous sums from his employers. Here, again, we come up against the gambler: Django thought that business should be conducted along the lines of a game of poker – not that he was very far off the mark – and, fearing lest he ask for too little, did not hesitate to lay down conditions that were often exorbitant, encouraged as he was, it should be mentioned, by one or two lucky breaks. On the other hand, his milieu had given him a certain confidence, had made him aware that his gifts should not be underrated. And how can we blame him for this? From his earliest years he had been regarded as the paragon of his race, and later he was worshipped by crowds everywhere, and admired by music lovers throughout the world.

Conscious of his importance as this artist was, he was nonetheless very punctilious when it came to publicity, and watched with a jealous eye to see that posters had his name printed in bold type. Very responsive to the plaudits of the press, he loved collecting the cuttings, showing them to his

cronies with a childlike satisfaction. I can remember an American magazine reproducing his photograph on the cover, soon after the Liberation. The fact that it was larger than President Roosevelt's, which adorned the lower half of the page, filled him with overweening joy and pride. Summing it up as frankly as ever, he said: 'The Americans, you see, know what I'm worth. I'm more popular than their President.'

Django, then, lived in the fairytale world of his own imagination, a world of popular fantasy, where the amazing exploits of the adventure films he had known in his childhood took place; and indeed he always had a soft spot for adventure films. He dreamt of journeys to distant lands and thought of Hollywood as the paradise that would crown his career. Even before the war he was imagining the reception he would be given, having learnt that Dorothy Lamour owned several of his records...and perhaps he already had a vision of the films he would make, where he would figure as the young tyro who would end up by winning the famous star.

Dreaming of power, of luxurious mansions, of a whole world at his beck and call, he doubtless wanted to become the boss, his own impresario, a big businessman. As a gambler, he was convinced that finance must have incomparable sensations to offer. Just think of it: to get control of millions! To provoke a world slump, to speculate on the Stock Exchange, that's the real stuff. It was Django's peculiarity that he could never distinguish between fact and fiction, even in capital matters, where he was always sure to hit upon the most absurd solutions. This curious inability to take a logical view of things meant that in all good faith he would place himself in the hands of the most dubious impresarios, flowing over as they were with empty promises, and at the same time treat his friends, whose prudence and good sense he found exasperating, with unjustified distrust and scornful disdain.

Moreover, successive mishaps no more dispelled his illusions than gave him greater foresight. Far from it, indeed, for as he got older, his lack of confidence in his entourage grew; he suspected them of wanting to exploit him. His scorn for the musicians he employed also increased; he took great pains to stress the difference between them and him. If, according to him, musicians ought to be looked upon as workers, it was because they were wage-earners; he, on the other hand, did not *work*, he *appeared*. He never forgave them if they were at fault and always believed he was overpaying them; and if from time to time he did not care to 'appear' himself, he had

not the least patience with his sidemen when they failed to come up to scratch, transfixing them with the penetrating glare that those who 'worked' with him knew all too well. Quick to insult them and to call them 'functionaries' or 'labourers' he expressed his distaste for these workers as curtly as ever. 'A glass of red wine and they're happy,' he would say.

His quickness to take offence has become proverbial. He refused to tolerate untoward comments from the audience, which were enough to make him put down his instrument and leave the stand. Conversely, he was very partial to compliments, and liked to be treated as a man of the world, conscious as he was of his exceptional abilities. The thought of carrying his guitar was repugnant to him; it was generally left in the hands of a musician or even the band leader! His brother Joseph was for a long time responsible for it and even had to keep it fitted out with strings and spare plectrums, until the day came when he rebelled against this fraternal tyranny!

Django took his status as a star very seriously, paid great attention to his presentation and always insisted that nothing should be neglected in matters of stage lighting and *decor*, so that his entrance might be as impressive as possible. As we shall see in due course, he even went so far as to contemplate arriving on-stage aboard a giant star let down from the ceiling! Unfortunately, he had counted without the fear which possessed him when it came to rehearsing this parachute act. For if he had wallowed from his childhood onwards in adventure stories of cowboys and gangsters, identifying himself with the hero, Django had an unsurmount-able atavistic dread of the mysterious and the unknowable, of anything that was beyond his comprehension. Night, shadows, stars, sky and sea remained for him conundrums over which he had no control. It might even be said that Django went out of his way to experience these sensations. Wasn't it 'to get scared' that he went to the pictures? Most of all he loved horror films. Cowering in his seat, he would hide his face in his hands, trembling all over. Often he could not help crying out at crucial moments.

As Stéphane Grappelly wrote in the *Melody Maker*, March 6, 1954, after seeing a gangster film Django was only too ready to assume the bearing of a gangster. He was particularly struck by the rolls of dollar bills that the tough guys of the screen nonchalantly pulled out of their pockets; doubtless this was the reason why lie carried his own notes rolled up in an elastic band when he was in funds. And however fat this roll was, it shrank almost visibly in his grasp. He was not the man to concern himself with a

bank account. Time and again he was seen carrying several hundreds of thousands of francs on him...and the next day he had gambled the lot away.

During the war, as soon as he heard an aeroplane engine he would scuttle into the capital's deepest shelter, near which he had decided to live. Always the first one down, he would leave the bottom of the shaft only after having sent his wife on ahead as a scout to assure himself that the danger was well and truly over. This dread of the unknown, typical of his race, is reminiscent of the fetichist ceremonies of the primitive tribes of Africa or the South Seas, whose priests combat the spirits of evil, storms or death by exorcizing charms or sacrificing animals, and even human beings. In much the same way, the Romanies, despite their deep loyalty to the Catholic faith, practise certain pagan or medieval rites to cure illnesses, preferring old wives' remedies to medical science.

To sum up, for those who were not close to him, Django was a difficult man to understand, sometimes intolerant, dissatisfied, arrogant, at others sensitive and generous, and always good at heart. The most deeply reserved of mortals, it was hard to make out his real feelings. And to top it all, leading a hand-to-mouth existence, a philosopher after his fashion, living for the moment and not caring a jot for the morrow, it was impossible to tell what he would do next.

This outline, delineated thanks to the memories of those who were Django's familiars, would be incomplete without his shadow: his calm and faithful shadow, his wife Naguine, the companion of the greater part of his life. Like any gipsy, she had received only a cursory education, but she possessed an instinctive intelligence of the sort one rarely finds in any woman. She had only to glance at Django to see what was bothering him. She knew his character inside out and took good care to get out of the storm's path when she felt that it was about to break. For Django could often be very morose indeed and was an absolute despot at home.↓

≡ Stéphane Grappelly, the *Melody Maker*, March 6, 1954.

Like any gipsy woman, she accepted this kind of behaviour, and since she adored Django brought all her diplomacy into play. Aware that a husband of this type is influenced by good food, she took care to serve him up his favourite dishes.

In bringing this presentation of Django to a close, I should like to deal summarily with the widely accepted belief whereby all those of his race are held to be natural musicians. Such a legend has no real substance and was

spread chiefly by the Romanies themselves, whose readiness to lay claim to the title of 'cousin' to the great guitarist is well known. No, Django was a truly exceptional person, endowed with magnificent gifts, and his fame is his and his alone.

Such, then, was Django Reinhardt, a wandering musician at large in the midst of the twentieth century.

2

The Musician

As I have already pointed out, this book makes no pretence of being an exhaustive study of Django the musician. Nevertheless, how can one avoid stressing the main reasons which make Django Reinhardt one of the greatest figures in jazz music? More than twenty different companies have distributed millions of copies of his records throughout the world; they can be heard on the juke-boxes of Texas, in the cinemas of Chile and on the radio networks of Cairo or Saigon. Throughout the world, his admirers have made him the centre of a veritable cult, forming themselves into a kind of brotherhood. Travellers returning from every land say that just because they are French, enthusiasts, collectors and even proprietors of record shops besiege them with questions about the life, character and music of their idol.

A glance at the discography which completes this book will moreover give some idea of his reputation. A second book would be needed to set down all these expressions of admiration. We shall restrict ourselves here to quoting an extract from the American novel, *From Here to Eternity*, by James Jones, which was a best-seller in the United States. On page 450' of the Fontana series edition may be found the following dialogue:

‘Have you ever heard of a guy named Dajango? Dajango Something?’

‘Sure,’ Slade said expansively. ‘Django Reinhardt. The French guitar man. You pronounce it Jango. The D is silent. He’s the best.’

‘There!’ Andy said to Prew. ‘You see? You thought I was lyin’. You thought I was makin’ it up.’ He turned back to Slade excitedly. ‘You got any of this Django’s records?’

‘No,’ Slade said. ‘They’re hard to get. All made in France. And very expensive. I’ve heard a lot of them though.-Well what do you know,’ he said. ‘So you know old Django?’

‘Not personally,’ Andy said. ‘I know his music. There’s nothing like it in the world.’

Later on, one of the main characters tells of ‘...the story...of the mythical Django the Frenchman the ‘Greatest Guitar Man in the World’.’ He speaks of ‘the poignant, fleeting exquisite delicate melody of his guitar’. The passage ends with: ‘The American Eddy Lang was good, but Django the Frenchman was untouchable, like God.’

And as Stéphane Grappelly, who must surely be a better judge than anyone else, has it: ‘Django was a genius in the real sense. He had genius and it found expression through music, particularly jazz.’↓

≡ Stéphane Grappelly, the *Melody Maker*, February 20, 1954.

Django’s worldwide reputation was made as a virtuoso guitarist; but Django was more than ‘the genius of the guitar’, as some people have cared to describe him. Genius is a word that should be used sparingly. One hesitates to apply it to a mere instrumentalist, even if he possesses unusual gifts as an improviser. The world knows only the charming and imaginative improvisations Django committed to record; but Django was not purely and simply an improviser. His intimate friends knew that he was a musician in the widest sense of the word. Gifted with an exceptional ear, instantly and with astounding accuracy he could spot the least mistake made during the rehearsal of a symphony orchestra. He could tell which musician was out of tune. Better still, he could say how a chord was built up and could break it down into its essentials with a mastery that might well have brought a glow of envy to the eyes of a brilliant student of the Academy. For this primitive found no satisfaction in folk music: only the subtleties of the most highly developed forms could capture his attention.

‘To us musicians Django seemed the rarest of pearls, the phoenix in all its purity risen again into the twentieth century from the pit of time,’ Andre Ekyan, who was amongst the first to discover his talent, said one day. The real basis of this metaphor, slightly pejorative in appearance, is not immediately obvious. In this age of technique and artifice, with Django we find music in its virtual state, like juice in the fruit, or potential heat in coal. What an astonishing creature this man was, a troubadour at once untutored and refined, ignorant of all musical learning, a born composer who could neither read nor write! It is here, perhaps, that we come up against the most disturbing aspect of one of the strangest musicians of our day and age. Ought Django to have learned musical notation? It is certain that his

unusual gifts, his original ideas and natural talent as a composer, had nothing to gain from academic instruction, and techniques could only have compromised his musical purity and innocence. However, tuition would have given him the ability to express himself, to get his ideas down on to paper. For, above all, Django was a composer and it is as such that he should be approached.

In his case, unfortunately, the composer was dependent on the skill and goodwill of other musicians, who occasionally put themselves at his disposal to note down his ideas. How many works have been lost for ever? For a long time restricted to the instrumentation of his string quintet, Django's talent finds its expression in themes as diverse as they are musically exquisite, which led the English composer Constant Lambert to write: 'Django is, without doubt, the most interesting figure in the world of jazz since Duke Ellington, and like him, he is not so much an arranger as a composer.'

In point of fact, with the exception of Duke Ellington it would be hard to find a jazz musician of that era who has to his credit as rich a collection of charming melodies (*Nuages, Mclodie au Crepuscule, Vamp*), themes with as subtle a harmonic basis (*Djangology, Belleville, Rythme Futur, Diminushing*), or with as original a rhythmic structure (*Oiseau des lies, Place de Brouckcre, Cavalerie, Swing 42*). The few compositions that he managed to bring to completion (such as *Bolero, Stockholm, Feerie*), provide more than enough different reasons for us to deplore that the composer in him did not more fully realize the scope of his talent.

In 1941 we heard this *Bolero* (which in 1957 had been recorded in an abridged form by a band of fourteen musicians) interpreted by a symphony orchestra of seventy musicians under the direction of Robert Bergmann in the Salle Pleyel. Ravel's famous *Bolero* and Debussy's *Fêtes* were on the same programme, and, in the opinion of the musicians, Django Reinhardt's composition stood up remarkably well against the works of these masters. One also remembers hearing the performance of his unfinished Mass in the chapel of the Institution des Jeunes Aveugles, which astonished the organists who were present. Despite its originality and modern character, this work retained a classical stamp, and like the musicians who were there, we should very much like to have heard other pieces of the same kind.

As water is a fish's element and the air a bird's, music was Django's. Whether he was composing, playing or listening, the realm of sounds was

the world in which he found his strongest emotions, where he gave shape to his creative impulse. The joy of savouring, analysing or marshalling notes was not for him a problem to be resolved on paper, but an edifice in sound which builds up inside oneself. It was the very art of sound, not an arithmetical arrangement of white and black notes: an edifice in sound based on a magnificent vision which he himself was the only one to experience, and which disappeared without a trace. 'He liked great things. And I believe he experienced them in the way they should be experienced. To see his expression in the glorious church of St Eustache in Paris, hearing for the first time the Berlioz Requiem, was to see a person in ecstasy.' ↓

≡ Stéphane Grappelly, the *Melody Maker*, March 6, 1954.

So intense an admiration, coming from a man of his calibre, a musician who understood music better than anyone, reveals to the full his simplicity and humility. For despite his occasionally childish behaviour, Django was always humble at heart and attentive when confronted with a work of art. He always listened in silence and never ventured to criticize.

We must content ourselves with a more prosaic reality, for the guitarist alone can speak for us. Not, however, the star who appeared before the concert hall public, vain and disdainful of the unfeeling crowd which stretched out before him, but the relaxed and intimate performer, lolling on his bed, plucking voluptuous notes lovingly from his guitar, or piling chord upon chord to create veritable frescoes in sound. It was the Django who would improvise on *St Louis Blues* for hours on end when he was face to face with an audience he knew. It was the Django who would spend whole days at the piano (he played it well enough to accompany a band) elaborating harmonic sequences that boasted a logical continuity worthy of the great composers of the eighteenth century.

'The harmonies, that's what I like best of all in music: there you have the mother of music,' he often averred. 'That's why I like J.S. Bach so much, all his music is built up on the bass.' Django was never concerned with melody, for this, he said, was suggested by the chord sequence.

Aware of every sound, Django could compose only in silence, isolated from all other beings. It was not in objects or moods that he sought his themes. It seems likely that notes assumed a pattern for him on a predetermined harmonic sequence and a set rhythm. Sometimes, if the atmosphere was favourable during the band's intermission, an idea would take shape and it was enough for him to point out the basic chords to his

fellow musicians to give his inspiration free rein. He was at ease only with sensitive musicians whose ears were keen enough to follow his developments and foretell the course of his invention. In Stéphane Grappelly he had fallen upon an ideal partner who made a perfect foil for him, interpreting his ideas faithfully and even going so far as to anticipate his desires.



Django completely renewed the role of the guitar in a jazz group, not only from the standpoint of melodic invention but also in regard to accompaniment. He did this both by expanding its traditional harmonic scope, and by employing a number of diverse effects, of which he remains the undisputed master. No guitarist knows as well as he did how to use an infinite range of styles, now accompanying with a harpist's delicacy, now with the catlike suppleness of the double bass; sometimes he would step up the tension of the piece by digging down into the marrow of the beat with a sequence of crisp, aggressive chords. At others, he would skilfully sustain them, making them ring out like an entire brass section.

Just think of the incomparable support he gave jazzmen like Coleman Hawkins, Benny Carter or Barney Bigard in the days when he used to play with them! Even before the soloist's inspiration failed, he would suddenly break in with a series of incisive chords that had the immediate effect of stimulating him.

Alix Combelle saw in him 'a kind of second sight which made everybody's musical ideas an open book to him, which is why he's the finest accompanist of them all'. Listening to his work behind Rex Stewart and Barney Bigard in *Montmartre* or behind Eddie South in *Eddie's Blues*, one is aware not only of an acute sensibility but also of a prodigious technique and power; but what is most noticeable of all is that in these cases he was drawing on his artistic skill as a composer and not as a guitarist pure and simple. He was thinking in orchestral terms and using his guitar not as the frail instrument of moonlight serenades but as a whole band in miniature.

Moreover, Django Reinhardt was one of the very few white jazzmen to possess the exceptional attack and swing that are the birthright of the best coloured musicians.

Sometimes he was on edge, and then he would fall back on clichés, but generally he had a taste for the arabesque and his phrases were charmingly

constructed and developed with the art that conceals art. He was a pastmaster where modulation was concerned and the connoisseur can admire an inexhaustible melodic richness in his solos.

Melody, harmony and rhythm flowed out of this musician like some force of nature, but he had been led to entrust the whole expression of his creative genius to the guitar. It is this concentrated force which enabled him to attain such virtuosity and which forced him, so to speak, to discover possibilities in the instrument that had not been thought of until then. Endowed with a fantastic skill that had extraordinary physical strength as its ally, the composer inevitably grew into the guitar virtuoso who was admired throughout the world. In his improvisations we find the essential characteristics of his mercurial temperament: sensitivity, skill, rigour, drive, concentration, nobleness and versatility. His solos are sometimes ethereal, all grace and delicacy (*Improvisation, Night and Day, Nuages, Japanese Sandman, Montmartre*). At others they reach a breathtaking pitch of power (*Rythme Futur, Place de Brouckere*).

As we have already mentioned, one of the basic traits in his character finds expression in his extemporizations: the persistent 'gambler'. Listen, for instance, to his recording of *I'll See You in My Dreams*.

After the theme statement you will notice that Django, recalling one of the notes he has just played, seizes upon it and repeats it just as if he were bouncing a ball up and down, infusing it each time with a different expressive accent. Later, when a short phrase falls beneath his fingers, he toys with it, splitting it up at his leisure until he has exhausted its possibilities; and he does all this whilst unfolding a story. For all these details linked one to the other form part of a coherent 'tale', which, though improvised, will reach its logical conclusion, at one with a melodic line whose vagaries were unforeseeable.

Perhaps one can gain an even better idea of his extraordinary creative gifts and their orchestral amplitude, as it were, from a record like *Improvisation*, once one learns that he was asked for it off the cuff in the studio, during a session by the quintet, without his having had the chance to prepare a thing. 'All you've got to do is improvise something,' I told him. 'It'll be all right, go ahead.' And Django, thrown back on his own resources, at once extemporized a little piece of music, coming to a close when someone signalled to him that the inflexible three minutes were almost over. When we listen to this recording today, it is hard to believe that

such a *chef d'oeuvre*, delicate and violent at the same time, packed with melodic gems, endowed with astounding harmonic richness, yet perfect in form, could have been completely improvised. Nonetheless, this is how the record was made.

Jazz critics have taken Django to task because of the gipsy character of his music. Without denying his origins, it seems to us that this likeness is possibly accidental or at the most induced by the nature of his instrument. Brass instruments are suited particularly well to jazz, by virtue of the incisiveness and purity of their large tones, whilst strings are relegated to the secondary role of accompanying instruments; but whenever Django played his guitar he rose to the heights of the great improvising artists. The tone he obtained was a source of constant amazement. His intonation and vibrato had deeply human qualities that went straight to one's heart – without ever lapsing into the cowlike sentimentality of the Hawaiian guitar. His taste for the arabesque was in the purest tradition of performers like Benny Carter, Barney Bigard or Eddie South; and it seems difficult to regard these men as essentially *tzigane* musicians.

If Django was a pastmaster at expressing himself through music, he was anything but loquacious, and found it hard to find words and metaphors to depict the feelings he experienced when listening or creating. 'Music makes me gay or sad,' he might say; and we know that it could even make him exuberant or taciturn. 'I like the organ and the bass,' he would add, 'or a stack of strings playing over a double-bass beat, or a concert pianist accompanied by an orchestra.' And when we asked him what pieces of music he found most moving of all, he declared: 'Ravel's *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales*, which Hubert Rostaing and I heard at a symphony concert a few years back. And then there's Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue*. His music speaks to my heart and brings tears to my eyes. But maybe Debussy comes closer to my musical ideal, for in him I find the sensibility and intelligence that I look for in any kind of music'

How was it he became a jazz musician? 'Jazz attracted me because in it I found a formal perfection and instrumental precision that I admire in classical music, but which popular music doesn't have.'

However, if his extraordinary perceptual and creative gifts were deployed with masterly skill, they were essentially natural, instinctive. As Pierre Fouad has it: 'Django understood quickly, he caught on at once, without needing to reflect or analyse. When he listened to a record, he'd

react straight away, turning toward those whom he knew would understand him, as if to say: 'That's good, but this isn't!' He had a clear-cut appreciation of all music and could enjoy Stravinsky, Bach or a great jazz musician. He was unprejudiced and never made a mistake. From the very first bars he knew whether the music was well played, that is to say whether the conductor had a firm grip on the work or whether, on the contrary, he was overawed by it. If it was a jazz soloist he could tell at once if he was still casting around for inspiration or if he really had 'got off the ground'. And as the case might be, he would either purse up his nostrils as though to say disdainfully 'That's gallery stuff', or his eyes would glow with pleasure and satisfaction...one might even say greed.'

When he came back from America, so Pierre Fouad tells us, he said how much he had enjoyed Frank Sinatra. Obviously he would have taken good care not to mention this to a jazz fan, knowing that he would be misunderstood. 'Sinatra, there's an artist for you!' Django declared. 'There are artists of every kind. In Armstrong there's an artist different from any other, just as Stravinsky, again, is altogether unique. But that doesn't mean we can't appreciate all of them.' He appreciated them all according to their value and at different levels.

'There's a proper kind of music for each hour of the day,' Django always maintained. 'Obviously, when you get up you don't want to leap around with the Harlem Negroes! So you put a romantic-sounding disc on the gramophone. Something nice and nostalgic' – that was the way he would put it. 'Then in the afternoon you'd go to hear a symphony orchestra, the Boston Symphony. And you'd listen to some good music' – there again you have one of his favourite expressions. 'By then it's time to dine. Where do you go? To the Rainbow Room, on the New York rooftops, where you'd hear a good light orchestra. You don't want to spoil a nice juicy steak by bolting it down. And when you listen, the music's pleasant, well played, pretty, if you like. And after dinner? Well, you'd jump in a taxi and drive up to Harlem and listen to those fine Negro players, because by now it's midnight, and the time's right for that kind of thing. Every kind of music can be beautiful, as long as it's well played, and you're listening to it in the right atmosphere.'

Stéphane Grappelly has summed up this musical genius better than anyone: 'He did more for the guitar than any other man in jazz. His way of playing was unlike anyone else's, and jazz is different because of him.'

There can be many other fine guitarists, but never can there be another Reinhardt. I am sure of that.'↓

≡ Stéphane Grappelly, the *Melody Maker*, February 20, 1954.

3

Once Upon a Time...

On January 23, 1910, as happened every year about the same time, a troupe of wandering comedians halted at Liverchies, near Charleroi,↓ in the course of their incessant journeyings; they were due to put on a show that night in the estaminet's public room.

≡ In Belgium.

Everyone from the hamlet and the farms around was already there, and in the smoky atmosphere the beer mugs lined up on the tables gave the event a festive air. For entertainments are few and far between in the little Brabant villages, where the year runs its course to the slow rhythm of days spent labouring in the fields or down the mine. And whilst hefty matrons were keeping their brats in order, in the next room the troupe was preparing to make its entrance. An unfortunate incident had made it necessary to rearrange the programme, for La Belle Laurence was indisposed and could not appear that evening.

Seen through the misty windows, the village took on the aspect of a faded backcloth. The night was starless. Every living creature seemed to have retreated into the estaminet. The ice-cold wind from the plain swept through the village's only street. The church might have been peopled by ghosts; but really it was less lonely than usual, for caravans that had arrived the previous day broke up the trim outlines of the village square. In the distance a dog was barking.

Drawing nearer, you would have noticed an extraordinary bustling to and fro inside one of the vans, which was dimly lit by the flickering glow of a candle-end. Feeling the pains she had been expecting for some time, La Laurence had decided to set off on foot for the village and, overtaken just in time, now lay on the only bed, undergoing the trials of childbirth, tended by the old women who busied themselves with cloths and basins. And whilst the distant noise of applause reached them from the only windows in the

place that were lit up, Reinhardt's woman brought her first child into the world. It was ten o'clock. The child was a boy. He weighed seven pounds. He was christened Jean, and they called him Django.

The blacksmith of Liverchies, who was still alive a few years ago, recalled this memorable birth: 'It happened some time before the war, the Great War of 1914-18...'



For centuries, wandering tribes have trundled along the highways of the Old World and have even spread beyond the seas. In the days when local festivals were always being held, their picturesque carriages would make their appearance at the entrance to villages and in the suburbs of towns. At their approach, the inhabitants would lock their doors and tell their little ones stories of the wicked strangers who kidnap naughty children.

Nazism, as we know, condemned this race, like the Jews, as unfit to be assimilated according to the theories of the regime. The facial features, tawny complexion and dark almond-shaped eyes of the Romanies betray their Hindu origin, sharply differentiating them from the Continent's other races, from whose influence they have remained free. Consumed with a desire for liberty, unable to settle down in the countries through which they pass or to submit to their laws, these tribes wander from place to place, preserving their age-old customs, living on air, odd jobs, the occasional concert-show, or by their wits, but more certainly than anything else off the profits of their thieving. Work is not their strong point; in fact, they regard it as debasing. And whilst the women have to look after the family welfare, all the men have to do is to see they are smartly turned out. As a result, the men are frequently proud and lazy.

Generally uneducated, these nomads often speak only their own dialects. Their way of life is a primitive one. Living on the fringe of civilization, they have no use for our institutions. Recognizing neither laws nor governments, they nonetheless respect their elders, and are usually headed by a patriarch, who is given the title of king.

Fetish-worshippers rather than believers, superstitious rather than religious, if they become Catholics it is more to keep evil spirits at bay than to rise towards God. Their patron is Saint Sarah, and each year the wandering tribes make a pilgrimage to Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer in order to do her homage.

Because there are no official documents it is difficult to trace the origins of the Reinhardt family with any degree of accuracy. The name, however, suggests that his forefathers came from Germany. Django's mother was able to remember that his grandparents were living in Strasbourg when the war of 1870 broke out. After the peace treaty was signed, the Reinhardts chose to live in France.

'I often heard Django say,' Emile Savitry tells us, 'that one of his grandfathers was in the Jardin des Plantes.↓

≡ For those not familiar with Paris, it should be pointed out that the Jardin des Plantes is not only a botanical but also a zoological garden.

I wondered whatever his grandfather could be doing there. He explained to me that his grandfather had been chosen as a model by a sculptor who had him pose for a statue depicting a prehistoric man; and he was very proud of this.'

The old folk still remember what a magnificent creature Django's mother was. Her dark complexion and her raven-black hair led to her being given the nickname of 'Negros'. Following in her father's footsteps, she had become a talented dancer and acrobat, admired by everyone.↓

≡ She was well over fifty when one evening at a private party she took off her shoes to perform a gipsy dance which astounded those who were watching. She died in 1958.

Yet, jealous as she was of her independence, she led an untrammelled existence and stubbornly refused to marry, which is why her children continued to bear the name of Reinhardt. 'Negros' was a vigorous and resolute woman; and she needed all her energy in bringing up her two offspring. She was completely devoted to both, especially Django, who was far from easy to deal with. Doubtless he instinctively took advantage of the absence of a father's authority. It seems probable that Django's father, like Joseph's, was a certain Jean Vees, with whom 'Negros' lived for some years. The elder son took his Christian name. Jean Vees was an 'artiste', of the sort commonly known as clowns; he played the violin or the guitar from time to time, and also tuned pianos or knocked the odd instrument together. As the years went by, this last speciality grew to be a family tradition. It was a question of picking up old, rickety instruments at the flea market, or in the second-hand shops, or even at the makers; and then, after putting one or two strings right, they managed to make these guitars, violins or mandolins usable once more, often even to 'freshen them up', that is to say

to improve their tonal quality, whilst giving them the appearance of old instruments.

Django's childhood was crammed full of incident. With his younger brother Joseph, he travelled the length and breadth of France in his mother's arms. The outbreak of the Great War found the three of them at Nice, but Django's mother decided to leave for Italy, which was still neutral. After staying a few months at Livourne, they sailed to Corsica, and then on to Nice again, where she learnt that the rest of the family had fled to Algiers. At that time Django was nearly five; he was very shy, had little to say for himself, and contented himself with whistling. One day his mother sent him to get some bread. As he was terrified of the Arabs, she had told him to look up into the air: 'God will throw you a few sous in his kindness.' He took such good care to follow these directions that he ended up by losing himself in the Casbah. Some housewife or other found him, and his mother eventually heard him calling to her from the fifth floor of a block of flats after she had informed the police and scoured the streets of the town, panic-stricken, for hours on end.

In due course they returned to France, in the midst of a raging storm. After staying on the Côte d'Azur for a short time, they went back to Paris at the end of the war, finding the caravan which they had abandoned outside the city; and here it was that Django was to lead a fairly settled existence for the next fifteen years.

4

The Turbulent Early Years

Those who are too young never knew the old Paris and its belt of fortifications, through which the city's swarming crowds passed by way of wrought-iron gates, controlled by the old octrois, distant descendants of the medieval tollhouses. In those days the suburbs proper began at some hundreds of yards from the ramparts, but in the narrow intervening space, which was known as 'the zone', had risen up a complicated labyrinth of hedges and tiny allotments, peopled each and every Sunday by a bevy of industrious gardeners. Near the gates you would find countless evil-smelling garbage heaps or industrial rubbish-dumps which were rapidly filling up the by now useless ditches. Farther along, whole villages built out of boards harboured, in the utmost degradation, the poverty-stricken wretches who had been cast off by the city, and hawkers and pedlars brought a touch of colour to the junk sales, of which the famous 'flea-market' is the last remaining vestige.

Here it was that the gipsies came to a halt, parked their caravans, and formed villages, whose picturesque character, in spite of the filth and the vermin, triumphed over the sordid surroundings.



Django was eight years old when his mother brought her van to a standstill near the Choisy gate. The waste lands of the zone or the slopes of the fortifications were to form the battlefield of his turbulent childhood. Shy, taciturn, yet immensely vain, our young hero became capable of the most illustrious exploits when he was egged on by the brats of the neighbourhood. Wistfully Django recalled the heavy bolts of steel he used to place on the tramlines in the Avenue de Fontainebleau on market-days, whilst his pals waited on the other side of the road, fervently hoping to see some magnificent accident, which, with luck, might well have resulted in a good twenty victims amongst the motley crowd of housewives. At other

times they would all hide behind an old fence to await the inevitable taxi; when it finally made its appearance it was greeted with a hail of stones before the culprits made off, well satisfied with this remarkable display of bravery. And then there were the cure's pears! All you had to do was to leap over the parsonage wall, taking good care no one saw you, for – watch out! – anyone who fell into the priest's clutches came away with more to remember than a haircut in the shape of a cross!

However, the gang's games were occasionally more prosaic and took the comparatively banal form of 'cops and robbers' or 'hide-and-seek'. And then there were the 'wars' with rival gangs. What happy days they were when Django commanded the 'Red Neckerchiefs'. Yet what painful memories they left behind! One afternoon when the band had set up its headquarters on the slopes of the fortifications, they saw the chief of an enemy gang approaching in the distance: Saucer Eyes. At once they decided to ambush him and whilst his accomplices concealed themselves in the dips and hollows around, Django, as was expected of the chief, went, hesitantly, to beard his redoubtable foe. Confronting him, he exclaimed: 'Your money or your life!'

Saucer Eyes replied with a masterly uppercut which knocked our unfortunate hero for six. In vain did he shout for help from his troops, who had deemed it more prudent to make their getaway without asking for their reward. From that day on, the stock of the 'Red Neckerchiefs' was very low, and Django, displaying a perfectly hideous black eye, did not dare to go out for a whole week.

Though the gang was based on the Porte de Choisy area, its operations were not restricted to that part of the zone alone. Sometimes they waited for the gas-lamps to be put out along the Rue Blanqui to steal knobs of coal from the horse-drawn wagons that toiled painfully up the hill. Whilst the most daring spirits climbed aboard, the rest of them picked up the chunks of coal and later took them back home, or sold them to the neighbours the day after. When this happened it was a time for general rejoicing, for in the afternoon they would all go off to the pictures. Happy days of adventure films, packed full of breath-taking incident: cowboys, pirates, burglars, detectives, a whole world of demi-gods thronged *The Mysteries of New York*, *Wrists of Steel*, *The King of the Indians*.... What thrills for those young urchins who saw fantastic exploits taking place before their admiring eyes, exploits that left an indelible impression on Django's memory.

Ah, the cinema! It was even more entertaining than school, the school Django attended for only a single day.

Does anyone still recall that school on wheels, the ‘evening courses’ of old man Guillon, who followed the fairs and went the length and breadth of the zone, hoping to entice the children of gipsy families to come to school? The inside, lit by gas, was scrupulously tidy: the forms, neatly set out in rows, faced the blackboard and the teacher’s desk. The teacher’s authority, however, meant nothing to these little scamps, who made such a nuisance of themselves that they were asked to return no more.

Other afternoons would find Django playing billiards in some café or other. Tremendously skilful, he already astounded veteran performers. Later, as we know, he was to measure himself against international champions. At other times he would be found dicing with the grown-ups. More than once he lost not only his last coppers, but his overcoat, hat and the rest. When this happened he was afraid to go back to the caravan, and traipsed about in a pitiable state, putting off to the last possible moment the inevitable hail of blows his mother invariably meted out to him.

One day when he was wandering down the Avenue d’Italie with his brother Nin-Nin (Joseph) and another pal, they were attracted by the sight of a boxing-ring that had been erected in a café. Invited to take the floor, they went at it hammer and tongs, to the great delight of the spectators, most of whom were local layabouts who threw down coins to spur them on. They came out of it rather knocked about and in rags and tatters, but jubilant at the thought of spending an enjoyable evening at the pictures.



Though rough and uneducated, the Romanies often show, if not, as we have seen, a natural facility, at least a certain liking for music – a racial trait that probably has its origin in national forms such as the Hungarian czardas or the Spanish flamencos. Leading an indolent life, the men often take up an instrument, generally stringed, such as the violin, mandolin, guitar or zither. Preserving a folk tradition down through the years, the old men like to recall their own youth and transmit a musical past, rich in colour, to the younger generation.

Whilst he was still very young, Django felt an irresistible attraction for music, and was to be seen at all the traditional festivals that unfailingly give occasion for musical entertainment. He would leave his friends and steal off into a corner, straining to catch every sound, his whole being possessed by

overpowering emotion. When he was only ten years old, he begged his mother to get him a guitar but she thought this was but a child's whim and, moreover, had not the fifty francs that were needed. Not until he was twelve did he finally get the longed-for guitar. It was given him by one of his neighbours, a certain Raclot, who had noticed how keen he was on music; the instrument was what was known at that time as a banjo-guitar. The event was to be a decisive one in the young boy's life.

Although he had not yet learnt to play it, Django never left his guitar, not even to go to sleep. At night he would wake up to pluck a few notes whose sound was a constant source of wonder to him. During the day, he would go and listen to musicians, eagerly watching their gestures and the positions of their fingers. He engraved these on his memory and once he had returned to his caravan did his best to copy them. In this way he learned to play by himself, mastering the guitar rapidly and with amazing accuracy. The musicians of the neighbourhood were astounded when they heard him for the first time. No one could play so fast and with such confidence.

He would play for hours on end, encouraged by the admiration of his elders; and very soon he was taking part in the village festivals, even making so bold as to back up singers. Leaving his old comrades to their own devices, he began to seek out musicians instead. One fine day he made the acquaintance of a hunchback who lived thereabouts, 'Lagardere', who also played the guitar. Off the two of them went, and time passed so quickly that after three days Django lost all courage, remembering that his return would entail the most dreadful scenes, and continued to haunt the streets of the neighbourhood with his friend. As one might expect, his mother nearly went out of her mind and, having notified the local police station as before, set off herself to look for the miscreant, whom she came upon at three o'clock in the morning as he was playing in a café in the Place d'Italie. The beating he received before the startled eyes of the hunchback can easily be imagined. 'That's your old lady, then?' the latter exclaimed. 'She looks more like a panther to me.' And meanwhile a grievously repentant Django was begging in sorrowful tones: 'Don't hit me any more, Mother.'



Django's uncle and father sometimes played in an eating-place near the Porte de Clignancourt and numerous gipsies who camped thereabouts would go along to hear them. The kiddies tried to slip into the room, but the waiters chased them all out, and Django had to hide under a table to listen

to his uncle, whose style he admired. One day his uncle came upon him unawares.

‘What are you doing here?’ he asked.

‘I’m just listening.’

‘Why, are you interested? But you don’t even know how to play!’

‘I can a bit. I can accompany.’

‘All right then, my fine fellow, take my guitar and let’s see how you make out.’

And his uncle was flabbergasted to hear him play with such skill. Henceforth Django was allowed to go with his seniors who made the trip to La Varenne each Saturday. The stories they told him about the place had amazed him. What was it that was so unusual then, about La Varenne? Well, Django’s uncle and other musicians used to go and play at Chez Clodoche, a cabaret in the suburbs where many Parisians came to dance and enjoy themselves; Albert Prejean was very often to be seen there. It was not on account of the fee old man Brochet paid them that the gipsies went along, but because of the skylarking that followed. When the dancing was over and all the customers had gone home, the gipsies went up to the attic where the boss had provided mattresses, and there, in the dark, they amused themselves by frightening each other. Some pretended to be ghosts, others made out they were hanged by ropes from the beams. These more or less macabre pleasantries plunged everyone into a state of absolute terror, and little Django, as one might expect, was frightened out of his wits.



Django was not yet thirteen when he began his career as a musician at a dance-hall on the Rue Monge, where he played the banjo with the accordionist Guérino, one of the most popular musicians of the day. Perhaps, reader, you never knew the bals-musette of that time, whose free-and-easy atmosphere certain establishments along the Rue de Lappe have tried to preserve in an altogether artificial way. For a long time they constituted one of the most picturesque aspects of the Paris underworld; they were the meeting places of thieves, spivs and prostitutes.

The bal-musette! The very name conjures up visions of smoky dance-halls with carved mirrors, the tables and walls inscribed with intertwined initials or naive scribblings that could be made out by the glow of unshaded red light bulbs hanging down from the ceiling. The band had to climb up a vertical ladder to reach a tiny projecting balcony. After each set a musician

made a collection with the time-honoured, 'Your loose change in the hat, please!' These things are representative of a whole era, a whole social milieu. Right-thinking people never ventured into such dangerous company, unless they were out for a cheap thrill.

Django played with Guérino for some time. After the Rue Monge, he was to be heard at the Montagne Ste Genevieve in the Rue de la Huchette, and then at Chez Marteau in the Place des Alpes. No matter where he was appearing, his mother came to collect him each night and took his pay, so that he would not go and dice it away with the ne'er-do-wells of the Porte d'Itnlie or the Porte de Clignancourt, according to where the family caravan was parked. For our hero was already taken with the gambling itch. All the money he could lay hands on over and above his salary went on it, including the two francs his mother gave him each day so that he could travel to work by the metro. He frequently arrived late, having had to walk all the way. Sometimes, too, he would leg it to the other side of Paris and spend his afternoons outside the Abbaye de Theleme in the Place Pigalle, straining to catch the sounds of Billy Arnold's band, which was appearing there. Nor was he the only one, for numerous musicians who are famous today used to listen with interest to the music that had crossed the Atlantic.

Jean Vaissade, the accordionist, tells how he made Django's acquaintance one day. 'It must have been around 1925 or 1926. At that time Fredo Gardoni was playing at La Chaumiere, a dance-hall near the Porte de Clignancourt that isn't there any more. Django, who lived just outside in the zone, often came to sit in, eagerly replacing the band's regular banjoist for several numbers. Already everyone admired him, for if he didn't yet have the mastery he was eventually to display, he was already carving out a style that was different from anyone else's. I can remember thinking how fantastic he was when I heard him play. And when I was offered the summer season at Stella Plage, near Berk sur Mer, young as he was I took him with me.' Django also played with the accordionist Maurice Alexander.

Many a musician of that period went along to the Salon des Familles in the Avenue de Saint-Mande after work was over at midnight. A 'Bal des Auvergnats'[↓] was held here every Saturday, and Guerino, Alexander, the guitarist Gusti, and Django were amongst those who occasionally sat in.

≡ Auvergne is a province in Central France. The original instrument used by Auvergnats was the *vielle*, an instrument resembling a lute in appearance, but which is played with a handle, rather like a hurdy gurdy. Their dance was the *bourree*. In the large cities other types of dance gained favour with them and the *vielle* came to be replaced by the accordion.

Already Django specialized in playing American tunes and, though the clientele of the place was not too keen on this type of music, he was loudly applauded whenever he played *The Sheik* or *Dinah*. Alexander used Django on several occasions at the dances the Rueil clubs organized on Saturdays at Chez Berlot.

By this time the musicians were getting to know Django, especially since he had carried off first prize for banjo at a bal auvergnat at Bouscatel's. After playing for the bals-musette on the left bank he moved out to Belleville, where he opened at Ca gaze, which was famed for its excellent dancers, most of whom were 'wide-boys'. He was appearing with J. Vaissade, but as visual he came regularly only for the first week. With increasing frequency he had himself replaced by one or another of his 'cousins' so that in due course 'the whole family passed through', as Vaissade puts it, with a twinkle in his eye. 'It was around this time,' continues Vaissade, 'that I made my first records with him. We went into a studio in the Cite Chaptal, which nowadays is a piano factory. I can remember they were recordings for the Ideal Company; and since Django could neither read, write nor even spell his name, 'Jiango Renard' appeared on the label of these discs. We also did a session for the Gramophone concern, with a slide horn player; but when the musical director, Pierro Coppola, heard the results he was horrified, finding the banjo accompaniment far too loud. It was some years before I dared set foot in the place again.'

When Alexander opened La Java, Django was in the band; that is to say he came when he felt like it, sending replacements in the rest of the time. His first marriage took place around then. He was seventeen years old and was already going out with a girl who lived near him in the zone. According to tradition, he eloped with his fiancée and they both disappeared for several days; this was enough for the wedding to be looked upon as an established fact in the eyes of the tribe and for festivities to be organized to consecrate it.

Another event which might well have had far-reaching consequences took place while he was appearing at La Java. One evening the dance was in full swing when the famous English bandleader Jack Hylton appeared, cutting an imposing figure with his cigar and immaculate evening dress. He was accompanied by one or two beautifully dressed ladies who struck a somewhat discordant note in these surroundings. This intrusion into the

domain of the sharpsters, with their roll-neck pullovers and caps pulled down over one ear, was ill looked upon until it became known that the outsider had come to hear Django and to make him an offer to join his orchestra.

It appears that contracts were signed; but Django was never to join the famous band, for only a few days after this event occurred the catastrophe which was very nearly to cost him his life.

5

November 2, 1928

It was one o'clock in the morning; Django had just come back from La Java. He found the caravan filled with artificial flowers which were to be taken to the cemetery the next day. They were all over the place, more than a thousand francs' worth. His wife, who was expecting a child, was already in bed. He was just getting undressed when he heard a noise amongst the flowers that might have been a mouse. Picking up the only candle he went forward to have a closer look; but the candle was burnt down almost to nothing and while the wax part stayed in his hand, the wick fell on the celluloid flowers which suddenly burst into flames. In the space of a few minutes the caravan was a raging inferno. Django was almost unconscious, having collapsed beneath a blanket he had grabbed with his left hand to try to shield himself, but he could just hear the cries of the neighbours who had rushed to the spot and were shouting 'Django's inside!' Scrambling to his feet and making his way across the blazing room he just managed to escape from the furnace, his whole body contorted in pain. His wife, too, had got out in time, but not without having her hair badly burned.

They took him to his father-in-law, who saw that the hand that had gripped the blanket was horribly inflamed and twisted, and had him moved with all possible speed to Lariboisiere, where he was to undergo prolonged suffering.

It was only when they came to undress Django that they found the right side of his body had been burnt from his knee to his waist, though his underwear was not even scorched. Seeing what a dreadful state his leg was in, the surgeon decided to amputate, but Django refused to allow this. He was in terrible pain and showed no sign of improving; but all the others, determined to see him leave the hospital, took him back to the caravan. It was obviously necessary to find further medical attention, and he was moved to a nursing home in the Rue d'Alesia, where he was so well looked

after that it was soon apparent that his leg was saved. On the doctor's advice, they brought him his guitar, and though it cost him a great deal of suffering, little by little he recovered the use of his left hand. He was bedridden for eighteen months, and his father-in-law ruined himself in making sure he was well cared for, assuring him each day that he would be able to play as well as ever. Sometimes they would take him along to their family celebrations, where the old men wept to think he would never play his guitar again.

At first he began to walk with the aid of crutches, and after a second operation, when his wounds were burned again (this time with silver nitrate to dry the suppurating flesh up into scars), he was able to leave the nursing home and return to his van. He still found difficulty in moving about, propping himself up by leaning on the furniture. Eventually he was able to sit at table, and by sheer will-power taught himself to walk normally once more.

Jean Vaissade tells of the visit he paid him in his caravan near the Porte de Chagnancourt one day, together with the guitarist J. La Torre. Seeing the poverty-stricken state he was in, he said to him: 'You're not too well-off right now, are you, sonny? Well, we'll have a whip-round among the musicians, and you can come along to Ca gaze one night and pick up the takings.'

'My word, but we got a fair sum together for the time,' Vaissade goes on. 'Since he was absolutely broke, Django had to get there on foot. And when we handed the money over to him, he asked us how he could get to a certain place that I can't remember now. We explained to him that he could take such-and-such a bus or change at such-and-such a station on the metro. But in the end he exclaimed 'Oh, I'll take a taxi after all!' You can imagine how thunderstruck we were.'

His hand stayed badly scarred, and his accident also left him with a veritable phobia about fires. He was wracked by frightful nightmares; every night he dreamt of fire, and every time he woke up soaked in sweat in the belief that his dressings had caught alight. Now, however, these were but dreams! One day when the whole gipsy population had come together at a family festival, Django joined the musicians...and what a revelation it was! Tears coursed down the cheeks of the old men when they saw the miracle that had been wrought, but others, though they did their best to hide their feelings, were obviously more than a little displeased.

Marked for life by his accident, Django had to wear dressings on his left hand for some time to come, since it was very slow to scar over; but soon he was to be seen once again in the Montmartre streets with his guitar, stopping in front of the café forecourts to play a few love-songs and going round afterwards with the hat. Best of all he liked the Can-Can, a large café on the corner of the Puie Pigalle and the Rue Victor-Masse, near the Bal Tabarin. In those days this was the favourite meeting-place of the Paris professional musicians. Only here did Django really feel that his talents were appreciated, and in point of fact it was not uncommon to see musicians interrupt their endless conversations to give ear to this amazing performer. One day one of them called him over and asked him to work with him. This was Stephen Mougin, at that time one of the best French jazzmen. He took him on at Les Acacias at one hundred francs a day, which was extraordinarily good pay for those days.

The era of the bals-musette was over. Once he began to play with a polished musician, Django was taken once and for all with the charm of jazz. Soon, too, he was on the road again; during the next few years he was to visit Le Touquet, the Côte d'Azur and the Basque country. His departure for the Côte d'Azur was hastened by sentimental considerations. After his accident, in fact, he had stopped living with his wife, and was more often than not to be seen in the company of a childhood friend, his cousin, Sophie Ziegler, better known by the name of 'La Guigne',[↓] with whom he had been acquainted well before the accident.

≡ Or 'Naguine', a nickname that had been given her because of the bright colouring of her cheeks.

'I got to know Django when I came back from Italy,' Sophie tells us. 'I was fourteen then. We went out together for two years. But at the same time he was going out with another girl and it was her he eventually married. For two years we didn't see each other, and then, when he came out of the nursing home, we met once more. Django made up his mind to leave with me for the Midi. We made our way there, town by town. We hardly had two halfpennies to rub together and we were as miserable as sin. I tried to make a bit of money by selling a few pieces of lace, at least enough to keep body and soul together. When we got to Nice Django looked for work, but he didn't have a guitar and no one knew him. From Nice we went on to Toulon by way of Cannes. We had to walk most of the way.'

At this point in the story it becomes necessary to bring in Emile Savitry. Agreed, lots of people had already expressed admiration for Django; but nobody had as yet taken it into his head to 'discover' him, as they say today. Savitry was one of those likeable artists who spent a bohemian existence in Montparnasse between the two world wars, and were frequently to be seen on the crowded forecourts of Le Dome or La Rotonde, dilettantes, painters, photographers or poets, enthusing over exotic art or revolutionary theories and carrying on their discussions until the crack of dawn. Savitry, who had come straight from the South Seas, had settled down for the time being at Toulon, where his family lived, uncertain as to what path he should pursue. He had taken a room near the harbour above the Café des Lions, and it was here he unpacked the relics of his travels amongst so many different peoples, together with a gramophone, some Maori records and a guitar, which he had learnt to play with the natives of the lands he had visited. One day he was surprised to hear unfamiliar sounds down in the café below and thought that someone must be playing records, since the music's quality was far superior to that generally produced by the local players. Hearing applause bring the recital to an end, however, he decided to go down; but by the time he had put on his slippers and a dressing-gown the musicians had gone.

'Tell me,' he asked the waiter. 'Who was playing the guitar just now?'

'Oh, two characters who wanted to earn themselves a drink.'

'It's the first time you've seen them?'

'No, they've been in from time to time.'

'Are they from Toulon?' Savitry inquired.

Evidently nobody knew them, but the fact that the guitarist, though maimed, had shown such mastery had made a deep impression on everyone there. Savitry was very curious and by dint of numerous inquiries got himself introduced to a Corsican guitarist who played locally. He told him that since he had listened to the musician concerned he felt like throwing his instrument away.

'This character's fantastic!' he added.

Disconcerted at being unable to find the wandering guitarist, Savitry went back upstairs, but not before making the waiter promise him he would let him know as soon as the two musicians came back.

A few days later, true to his word, the waiter knocked on the door and announced that the 'character' was down below in the café. When Savitry

asked him if he was already playing his guitar, the waiter replied that he was playing billiards. Thinking his leg was being pulled, Savitry retorted in a fury that it was no billiard player he was looking for, but a guitarist. Nonetheless, he went down and once in the café found two scruffy-looking men. One was stretched out on the bench, and the other, looking like a down-at-heel aristocrat, was playing billiards. Neither had a guitar, but thanks to the good offices of the Toulon musicians they were able to play.

Savitry invited them up to his room, and as they were climbing the stairs asked them whether they liked music, whereupon they smiled sarcastically at each other. Then Savitry put on some real jazz records. The reader will understand now why I brought Savitry into the story. For the first time in his life Django was to hear Joe Venuti, Duke Ellington and Armstrong's golden horn. Louis overwhelmed him. He took his head in his hands and began to sob.

‘Ach moune!↓ my brother’ he kept repeating.

≡ A gipsy exclamation expressing stupefaction or admiration.

Hours passed, they played more and more records and Savitry sent his brother out for some sandwiches. It was then he found out both of them were ravenously hungry: in a few moments all the food was gone. When he tackled them about it, they replied that they had come to Toulon with a caravan about a month before. They had been playing in the café's or the brothels in the harbour area, sleeping on the bar benches and eating when they got the chance.

By then it was two in the morning. Before taking leave of his new friends, Savitry asked them to lunch with him the next day. It was a Saturday and he had to go and visit his family at Le Lavandou. So he gave the two brothers the key to his room and told them to make themselves at home. They were thunderstruck, thinking he must be mad, but later they were to admit that such a gesture of confidence had completely disarmed them. Just imagine leaving a gipsy in the midst of a pile of treasures he could so easily make off with! However, when he came back on the following Monday, Savitry found the two of them sound asleep and snoring away for all they were worth. The conversation was a little halting at first, since Django was somewhat uncertain how to set about explaining to his host that he had invited his wife to join the party. Anything but a formalist, Savitry took the news in the best of spirits and rented a room in town, overjoyed to see his gipsies solidly entrenched in Toulon. By now their

music was essential to him. Day after day passed in rapid succession whilst they played the guitar or listened to records, sometimes on the forecourt of a café down in the old harbour, sometimes in Savitry's room. Whether he gave or received it, Django set no bounds on hospitality: after his wife he invited his mother. Thus it was that one morning Savitry looked up to see a tall woman framed in the doorway, hands on hips and eyes ablaze.

‘What have you done with my children? Where are they? Where can I see them?’

Invited to enter she came in and found Nin-Nin – this was what Joseph was usually called. Django and his wife were lying on a mattress on the ground. In an excess of maternal devotion she threw herself down beside them to make sure they were alive, and then, her fury appeased, looked round at Savitry and smiled at him in gratitude. Finally, after having asked him for ten francs, she disappeared, only to return a short while later, laden with food and cooking utensils! Surely it was no ordinary skill that enabled her to transform a small coin into several hundreds of francs' worth of goods in the space of a few hours! When Django's mother decided to return to Paris a week or so later, owing to ‘business reasons’, she left the room completely fitted out!

Soon afterwards the two brothers spoke of rejoining her. ‘I asked him if he had enough money for his ticket,’ Savitry says. ‘He replied that he was all right for cash, but I knew this wasn't so, since only the previous evening he had gone over to Bandol to play for a while at Suzy's place. She had a club down there. Since she didn't even pay him, he had to walk back; but as one might expect he wasn't going to boast about *that*. Despite this, since he didn't show any signs of cheering up I went along to see old man Tollard, who ran the Coq Hardy, a large restaurant on the Boulevard de Strasbourg. My brother, who was in the insurance business, had done him a good turn, and he couldn't very well refuse to help me. I asked him to take Django and his brother on and he agreed to do so for one week.

‘We had to find them two dinner-jackets and two guitars. They played there the whole week without any trouble, appearing during the intervals between the Federoff Orchestra's sets. This was a Russian band, and its members were astounded to hear how Django, accompanied by his brother, would interpret tzigane music, especially the *Czardas de Monti*.

‘When he was paid, Django had at his disposal a small fortune, for as luck would have it he had asked for five hundred francs a day, and in

addition I had arranged that both he and his brother should get their evening meal free of charge.

“You’ll be able to get your tickets to Paris now,” I said to him.

“Oh, I won’t be going back there as yet. Come and have dinner with us!”

‘Whereupon he ordered a veritable feast which cost him everything he’d earned the previous week. When I reproached him for his open-handedness he replied: ‘But why not? Next week we can start all over again’.’



A succession of unforeseen circumstances was now slightly to change the existence of the two vagabonds. The designer Pol Rab, who was then getting a new cabaret together for the Palm Beach at Cannes and was looking for a band to alternate with the English band that the management had engaged, came to Toulon. At that time Louis Vola was leading a band at The Lido, a dancing spot that was open every night from nine till midnight. One evening when he was leaving the place, his work over for the day, he heard the sound of music coming from the beach. ‘I went nearer,’ says Vola, ‘and amidst the boats that had been pulled up on the shore I made out two fellows playing guitars in the midst of a group of people. I invited them to come along to the club the following day. They came now and again and were especially interested in the jazz records that were played on the gramophone there. Sometimes, too, I’d come across them playing at Chez Thomas, a bistro in the Rue Merle. I still didn’t know their names, but, as you’ve guessed, they were Django and his brother Joseph.

‘One day my friend Biancheri said to me: ‘You can’t go on messing around all your life! I’ve got a pal called Pol Rab. He looks after the entertainment side at the Palm Beach in Cannes. He’s fitting out a club and is looking round for characters who play accordion, guitar, anything in that line! You want to get cracking! This is a good opportunity and they’re opening next week!’

‘Naturally enough I jumped at the chance, thinking to take Django and his brother in with me. But when it came to looking for them, what a performance it was! I had a five h.p. Doriot-Flandrin-Parent, a dreadful old bus. And I drove off at top speed for La Rode – this was the district where all the gipsies met – I knew that Django had been seen playing bowls there the very same morning. It was noon when I got there; but when I asked where Django was, the gipsies eyed me suspiciously, no doubt thinking I

was from the police, and said they hadn't the faintest idea. Though convinced that Django had gone to ground in one of the vans, I had to leave without finding either of my two guitarists. What in fact had happened was that Django had cleared off that very morning after saying good-bye to Savitry and promising to look him up next winter in Paris.

'So I started alone at the Palm Beach and every day found me at the steering-wheel of my car, cruising along the roads of the Esterel. As soon as I caught sight of a gipsy encampment I'd stop and ask whether anyone had seen a tall fellow who played the guitar and his brother, who had a moustache and thick eyebrows; but I didn't have any luck.'

At this point we must have recourse to Naguine again, who was accompanying her husband: 'For some days we had been out on the road,' she relates, 'walking most of the time. One afternoon we were on our way back from Nice when we passed in front of the Palm Beach, and Django, hearing the band, said to me: 'We'll stop here.'

'We were flat broke. I pointed to the boats that were drawn up on the beach and said to him: 'We can sleep in them.'

'No, I'll tell you what. We'll book into the most expensive hotel in Cannes. If we're cheeky enough we'll get away with it. Tomorrow you'll get some cash together somehow or other.'

'The next day I left Django in bed. Just as I was going out, they asked me to settle up for the room.

'I haven't any money on me at present. I'm just off to the bank and will pay you later.'

'And so I did. I believe the room cost fifty francs, including breakfast. That night we went back to the Palm Beach, and Django stood listening to the band.

'If God's good to me,' he said, 'He'll see I get in there to play!' '

Let us return now to Louis Vola.

'As I left the Palm Beach,' he says, 'I came on Django and his wife.

'I've looked all over the place for you,' I exclaimed. 'Where have you been?'

'Fishing,' Django replied icily.

'And where are you staying?'

'At the Georges V.'

'What! The Georges V in the Rue Antibes?'

'Yes.'

‘I couldn’t believe my ears. But it was true all the same. It seems he’d been taken for a Hindu prince. Since I imagined he must be pretty short of cash, I told him: ‘You’d better leave there in a hurry.’

‘Where they lived the next few days, I don’t know, but one night I said to Django: ‘Listen, the bungalow next to mine is empty at present. It’s in a garden surrounded by walls. You’d be really cosy there.’

‘So the bungalow was rented and the very same evening Django started playing at the Palm Beach. Both of us were got up as sailors. We wore striped jerseys, blue bell-bottoms and sandals. Jack Harris’s well-known English band was playing opposite us. Every night we did our turn and everything went well...except for the season’s big Gala Ball. Django was nowhere to be found. I looked everywhere, but with no success.

‘That day I’d been silly enough not to follow him, as I usually did when he went off to visit his fellow gipsies who were camped just outside Nice or thereabouts. That was the only way I could be sure he’d show up for work on time!

‘Django did in fact return. And eventually his brother joined us, when they’d finished decorating the Boite a Matelots for the opening night. There we were perched on that damned fishing boat, with nets and other nautical props dangling all round us. I was still playing accordion. Later a third guitarist joined us. He was called Tapolo and had a really ugly head of hair. As a matter of fact he’d been an acrobat and had played guitar with a second-rate circus.

‘Need I add that this wasn’t the last time Django failed to turn up? Generally, when I knew that he intended to go and see the gipsies at the Paillon de Nice I’d go too and spend the whole afternoon with him, bringing him back with me in good time for work. Otherwise he’d never have returned. One afternoon, about tea-time, I saw Nin-Nin arrive by himself.

‘And where’s Django?’ I asked.

‘Oh, he’s out of sorts, he’s taking it easy...He’s not so good.’

‘I didn’t attach too much importance to this at the time but when, in turn, Joseph told me he had toothache, it occurred to me at once that nobody was going to be around that night. Now on that very same night a gala evening in honour of Francis Carco was due to take place. Five hundred places had been reserved and the room had been decorated with giant books bearing the titles of the author’s works. I went back to the hotel

to eat and get changed and then went round to Django's place: not a soul in sight. I got to the Palm Beach: just the same story. I began to get worried. So I jumped into the car and following a hunch drove as fast as I could to the railway station. And what did I see when I pulled up? – La Guigne and Django's mother waiting patiently on the pavement.

“What are you doing there?” I asked them.

“Ah, Vola, they're crazy, they want to go back to Paris!”

“And who's got the tickets?”

‘As one of them showed them to me I snatched them out of her hand.

“Where's Django?”

“Over there playing billiards with Nin-Nin.”

‘I went over, pointed out that the gala started at ten that evening, and said I was expecting them. They turned up all right. Later Naguine told me that Al Romans was opening a new club in Paris and had written asking them to come.

‘Whilst only Django and his wife were in Cannes, everything went nicely. Our two bungalows stood next door to each other. The gardens were separated by a little wall. And since you could see over the top we had only to make a sign and Django and his wife would come and eat with us. But after a while the first caravan arrived, then two more, then a fourth. Just as always happened when Django settled down anywhere, the place soon became the rendezvous of all the gipsies in the neighbourhood.

‘The house only had two rooms, both on the ground floor. Sometimes as many as twelve people were sleeping there! You just couldn't believe it! One morning when I came home to look for Django, I saw two bodies jutting out of one of the rooms. It was Nin-Nin and little Perron – he's dead now. Since there was no space left, they had kipped down with their legs inside and the other half of their bodies, huddled up in the sheets, outside the house!

‘In the garden there was a table which stayed laid for months on end. Great loaves of bread, bottles of wine, cheeses, pates and other provisions were always to be seen on it. Whatever time of the day or night it was, any one of them might sit down for a snack. Some in fact slept in the garden, on the grass or in hammocks strung up between two pine-trees. Monkeys in the trees would often grab at the hair of the terrified visitors; but these monkeys, one need hardly add, were Django's ‘cousins’, gipsies who

happened to be passing through and climbed over the walls of the nearby bungalows on the lookout for a good haul.

‘Sometimes, when it was time for him to leave for work, the gipsies would coax Django: ‘Surely, brother, you’re not going to let us down?’

‘It was then he’d ‘forget’ to go to the Palm Beach.

‘One day when Voltera was passing by a caravan that was parked near his place he saw Django, already dressed for work, lying on an eiderdown under the wagon flat on his back! He woke him up and Django asked him in for a drink. Once inside the van he saw that all the cutlery scattered over the table was marked *Palm Beach*!

‘What tales could be told that not only throw light on Django’s strange personality but also make it easier to understand the gipsies as a race!

‘As more and more of them arrived, there were soon gipsies everywhere. They were camping on the beach and leaving litter all around. It was a terrible mess.

‘You’ll have to get rid of them, those friends of yours,’ the Mayor of Cannes told me at last one day. ‘We can’t go on like this!’

‘Luckily the season was drawing to a close.’

‘When I visited Django,’ Savitry recalls, ‘he had just bought a big white American convertible – at least, it had been white once, but it still went like a bomb, though the chrome was all rusty and corroded. Only the framework of the canopy was left.’

‘Django,’ Naguine adds, ‘had bought this Dodge for eight hundred francs with the idea of learning to drive. Whenever he took us for a ride in it we were scared to death. ‘Look out!’ we were always screaming, ‘he’ll have us in the sea in a minute!’ ‘

‘He was as proud as a peacock of his driving,’ Savitry goes on. ‘He was off like a flash whenever he had a moment to spare. He’d sink a quick one at Nice or Juan-les-Pins and then visit the gipsy camps around and about, or else go for a quiet fish in the streams. His car was everywhere to be seen, weaving in and out of the Rolls along the Croisette or tearing round the hairpin bends. And each night he took good care to see that it was parked bang in front of the Palm Beach, to the extreme annoyance of the Casino playboys. Finally one day he drove it into a ditch and left it to its fate.’

‘At that time Jack Harris’s band was admired by everyone,’ Louis Vola tells us, ‘both by the public and the night-club set. When we were listening to them one night, Django remarked that it wasn’t difficult to get an outfit

of that sort together. It was the end of the 1932 season and we were just about browned off. One night just after twelve we'd got together in the bar. There was Django, his brother, and one or two musicians from Marco's band: Rene Guerin the saxophonist, Rumolino the baritone player and the drummer Bart Curtiss. We amused ourselves taking off Jack Harris's style. Just at that moment old man Fillioux came out of the 'Baracca' (the baccarat room) and was astonished to hear such sounds long after Jack Harris had finished for the night. He came into the room where we were and recognized us. We had stopped by then but once he had recovered from his surprise he told me: 'No, go on, keep at it!'

'And off he went to get Andre. When they came back they sat down in front of the band and kept shouting: 'That's the stuff, Vola!'

'That's how it came about that Jack Harris never returned to the Palm Beach and how our band was signed up for the following season.

6

Back to Paris

‘**A**ndre or Fillioux had presumably spoken about our band to Leon Voltera, for one night I was told: ‘Now look, M. Voltera and his wife will be here listening to you pretty soon. They’ve decided to open a Boite a Matelots in Paris this winter. Pol Rab’s going to fix up the *decor*.’

‘M. and Mine Voltera turned up for the audition, but he was sceptical about it, finding it strange that the band played so softly. There weren’t enough trumpets or that kind of thing, he thought. But when we’d stopped playing, he came up to me and said: ‘That’s fine. We’ll take you on trial. Come and see me tomorrow: I’ll sign you on for a five-month contract.’

‘So along I went. Miraca, the manager of the restaurant, whom I knew well, was there, sitting next to me. When we started discussing fees, Miraca, who had put his foot on mine, pressed down on it for all he was worth.

‘The band’s worth fourteen thousand francs a week,’ I ventured.

‘Miraca pressed my foot again.

‘Fourteen thousand francs,’ Voltera mused. ‘That’s a lot of money. I’ll give you nine thousand and throw in an afternoon tea-dance. You’ll be much better off like that...’

‘Once again that foot came down hard on mine. By now I wasn’t sure whether that meant I should stand out for fourteen thousand or take nine.

‘I’ll take nine then,’ I said.

‘You’ll have the contracts tomorrow.’

‘Once Voltera had left, Miraca exclaimed: ‘You damned fool! Why didn’t you stick out for fourteen thousand?’

‘How was I to know? You pressed just as hard for nine as for fourteen thousand!’

‘As it happened, I never regretted taking nine. In fact we got ten and the tea-dance into the bargain, and that was worth many other contracts to us in

Paris.

‘While we were waiting for the Boite a Matelots to open,’ Louis Vola continues, ‘we played for a time at Cyro’s. The boss of the place had been after the band for two years without success. Lartigue told me about this, and asked me point-blank whether we could start in ten days. I said we could. So we spent two months at Cyro’s. It was about this time I added a violinist. I didn’t know the Paris musicians very well and I’d been warned that Stéphane Grappelly was unreliable, so I took Sylvio Schmidt on. We also played at the Embassy. Arthur Briggs was just off to play a winter season and set up the job for us, telling me to go and see the boss.

‘It was on December 22, 1952, that we opened at the Boite a Matelots in the Rue Fontaine, with an instrumentation that was exactly the same as the one we’d presented to Leon Voltera. We had Django and Nin-Nin or Roger Chaput on guitars, Marco on piano, Bart Curtiss on the drums, Jean-Jean on tenor, Rumolino on bass saxophone and Léon Ferreri playing violin. Pol Rab had arranged for the boat, fishing-nets and the rest of the paraphernalia to be sent up from Cannes, re-creating the atmosphere of the Boite a Matelots at the Palm Beach. Opposite the stand, on a balcony that had been constructed over the door where you went in, played the accordionist Guerino, with whom Ujango had had his first job.’

‘Numerous musicians used to go and listen to that band,’ Alix Combelle recalls. ‘I was just getting started on sax, and they weren’t too keen on letting musicians in, but whenever we managed to slip past the door without being spotted we used to get down behind the band. That group was different from the others: the music was soft and only Django took solos.’

‘It wasn’t so much at the Boite a Matelots that we used to enjoy ourselves,’ Leon Ferreri recalls. ‘When all’s said and done the music we played there was pretty boring, since we had to play very softly and rarely took any solos. But during the intermissions or after hours we used to get together in the café over the way with Django and his brother and jam until Naguine or my wife came to fetch us back home.’



The Reinhardts, the mother, her two sons and Naguine, had made their way back to Paris by easy stages and, true to their word, came to call on Savitry. He was living in an enormous studio in the Rue Vitu in the fifteenth arrondissement, on the ground floor at the back of the courtyard. ‘In the space of a few days,’ Savitry says, ‘the studio was well on the way to

resembling the bungalow at Cannes. It was absolutely charming. 'Negros' rapidly assumed command. She was the first one up in the mornings. As soon as we'd given her five francs she'd be off on the scrounge. She used to make her first call at the tobacconist's in the Rue Saint-Charles to drink a cup of coffee and buy a packet of Gauloises. She'd be back around twelve, her shopping baskets brimful. She'd even bring a bottle of apéritif with her! How she managed it I'll never know! She had her special customers she sold lace to. Now and again, when she was right out of cash, because we'd spent the lot, I'd ask my brother for fifteen or twenty francs and off she'd go to get stocked up in lace at Le Marais.

'Django had the right to do whatever he wished and his mother was always fussing about after him. In the morning she'd put the hot iron over his trousers so that they wouldn't make his legs cold when he got dressed. Django was the big boss.

'More and more of his so-called cousins began to arrive. First of all they were suspicious and wondered however Django could bear to live with 'peasants' in a real house. They inspected all the rooms, trying to make out how it all worked. Then they settled down to have a bite with us, picking their teeth with their knives...

'Django was really 'playing for himself', with his brother and a few gipsies who happened to be passing through. I saw the most fantastic characters spend night after night there listening to Django, including whole families and their offspring. The life we led was a free and easy one. Everybody brought something along with him, so that there was always something to eat. And then, when we were all tired we'd kip down, each of us finding a nook that suited him...except in the attic, that is, which I'd decorated with souvenirs I'd brought back from the South Seas. The Romanies were terrified by them; most of all by the sharks' skeletons, which were hung down on wires from the ceiling and, being phosphorescent, glowed in the dark! Django was scared stiff and pulled the sheets over his head to hide from them!

'I must say I've never understood why the neighbours didn't complain about the racket we kicked up in the studio all the time. Most of the tenants in the building were White Russians, many of whom were taxi-drivers. One can only think they enjoyed it. Often you'd see them leaning out of their windows listening.'

When Django wasn't to be found in the studio, it was because he was off playing in one of the capital's Russian cabarets, the Casanova, the Scheherazade, the Don Juan; or else he'd be listening to some band or other in the Montmartre or Mont-parnasse clubs. At that time Andre Ekyan was playing at the Croix du Sud with Al Romans, and recalls that one night a person with 'the face of a Calabrian bandit', black eyes, a steady glance and a down-turned moustache came in by himself and sat down as though he were a regular opposite the band, staring at him with such insistence that Ekyan thought he was being provoked and very nearly lost his temper. This, of course, was Django, who had come along to listen to his playing with extreme curiosity.

Stéphane Grappelly provides confirmation of this story. 'I saw Django soon after I got back from the Argentine,' he says, 'some time towards the end of 1931, I think. At that time I was playing at the Croix du Sud in Montparnasse with Andre Ekyan the saxophonist. One night three or four persons came into the club, all of them as different as could be imagined from the usual clientele. They listened to us attentively and stared hard at us...in a way that was, in reality, none too pleasant. They were of such dubious appearance that I thought they might be gangsters, or, worse still, gangsters who disliked our music. Whilst I was observing these curious visitors, fascinated by their eccentric way of going on, it suddenly dawned on me that they must be gipsies. I was almost sure I'd already seen the tallest of them playing the guitar in the Paris streets. He came up to the band and made as though he wanted to have a word with me. In the most extraordinary French he asked me to play a jazz number. He spoke rather differently from the general run of customers, but I noticed that despite his apparent hardness he was shy at heart. But however that may be, we began to talk, and to talk about music. I was surprised. I'd feared – I recall it well, though my memory's anything but good – that this tall fellow intended to punch me on the nose. Instead, I found him expressing himself in somewhat embarrassed tones. And though he spoke a characteristically rough-and-ready French, there was something kind about him. Django came to the Croix du Sud several times and we always used to talk about music and jazz, which he knew best from records.'

'Of all the musicians I've known,' Andre Ekyan once confided to me, 'Django's the one with whom I've exchanged the least number of ideas but with whom I best got along from the musical viewpoint.'

At that period Django was a real primitive, completely unconcerned with the material affairs of this world and living for music alone. It was music he loved above everything. Once accepted by the group that gravitated around Ekyan he became a familiar figure and provided Jean Cocteau with the inspiration for one of the characters in *Les Enfants Terribles*.

Jean Sablon got to know him at the Rococco and wanted to sign him on as his accompanist. Sign on the elusive Django! What an idea! Sablon and Ekyan went to his caravan near the Porte de Choisy, to which he had returned, in order to persuade him to accept. Rehearsals were held, but whenever he was left to his own devices he 'forgot' to come.

'Jean Sablon had just bought one of the first Ford V8^s,' Ekyan recalls. 'He used to let me have it every night to take Django back home and since I had to collect him the next day, Jean never had his car!' Thanks to this, our hero was able to turn up each day with impeccably polished shoes. Up till then La Guigne had had to carry her husband on her shoulders along the miry footpaths of the zone to make sure he arrived without being caked to the knees in mud.

This job with Sablon at the Theatre Daunou resulted in Django's first records with Sablon and his sister Germaine, or Eliane de Creus.

'I remember a recording session,' declares Michel Emer, 'which we did in the Salle Chopin for Gramophone, with Eliane de Creus. Django had been asked to come at two, but didn't arrive. We rehearsed without him and when everything was ready to make the first side and the engineer had switched on the green light to signify that the recording was about to start, we saw the studio door open and our guitarist emerge from behind a newspaper parcel. By then the red light had been switched on and the band had begun, but Django, who had unpacked his instrument, was already accompanying us in masterly fashion, though he didn't know a single note of the melody we were playing. Better still, he took the breaks we'd set aside for him perfectly.

'Django didn't play in the operetta, but backed Sablon every night at the Boeuf sur le Toit and at the matinees at the Rococco, a cabaret that Moises had opened in an hotel on the Rue Marignan.'

Al Romans tells how they were surprised to find that Django had suddenly disappeared one evening at the Rococco. Since he was nowhere to be found in the place, Romans suddenly thought of looking for him outside

in the street. Django was deep in reverie on a seat: 'How beautiful the moon is, my friend,' he exclaimed...

'During the winter of 1955-4 we took Django off on tour with us,' Ekyan goes on. 'Jean Sablon was appearing in the chief towns, on the Côte d'Azur and in the hotel Moises had opened at Le Mont-Genèvre. In the course of the tour Django bought a Chenard racing model, an amazing machine that had been driven in the Le Mans twenty-four-hour event.'

It is Romans, once again, who recalls how Django, who was unable to read but reluctant to admit it, was one day consulting a contract that had been made out for a job in England. Holding it upside down, knitting up his brows and pointing to a certain paragraph with his forefinger, he exclaimed: 'I don't care for that clause there!' The clause in question laid it down that return tickets for the journey should be paid for!

Regarding the total absence of education on Django's part and his evident desire to conceal it, Grappelly, who can claim to have been his teacher some years later, provides some interesting details.↓

≡ Stéphane Grappelly, the *Melody Maker*, March 20, 1954.

'Django,' he says, 'was not a man who found it easy to ask advice, and he would sometimes okay an offer without even showing it to me. That was one reason why we had a few catastrophes at the beginning.

'Later on most of the letters came to me, and I tried to arrange the work for the group. Even so, two signatures were needed, and after a time I said: 'Look, Django, when we sign a contract it is miserable for you having to put a cross.' (It was a funny cross too.)

'I think it will look brighter if you sign your name.'

'At once he was enthusiastic to learn – so long as we kept it a secret – and I began showing him the letters of the alphabet. As it was a difficult matter for him, I taught him just the capitals.

'I will not say that I taught Django to write; but I certainly showed him how to sign his name. We began, naturally enough, with 'Django' and took so long on the word that I said: 'Never mind the 'Django' – 'D' will do just as well.'

'At first he was insistent on the whole name; he really liked the name Django, said it sounded nice (he never liked me to call him Reinhardt, always Django). Finally, he got tired, too, and agreed with me that 'D' would do.

‘That was all right. The great job came when we started on ‘Reinhardt’. It is a complicated name and spelling meant nothing to Django, anyway. Still, he was a painter who could remember a shape, and at last he got it.

‘Once he had, there was not enough paper in the room to satisfy him. Everywhere I looked I saw ‘D. Reinhardt’. It was a relief, because few things were ever more difficult than getting that man to sign his name.

‘And it was worth the effort, because in his face I saw such pleasure.’

And now we come at last to the English trip. ‘We were going to fly,’ Ekyan says. ‘But, oh no, that was out of the question! Django neither wanted to fly nor go by boat. And when we asked him why, he had but a single answer: ‘There are spies.’

‘You can interpret that just as you like. There were spies on the boats. That was it and all about it. Obviously, this was just another instance of that psychological dread Django felt for all those things he was unable to explain to himself: silence, darkness, in fact everything that was mysterious and beyond his understanding. In London we played at the Monseigneur, a very smart night spot in Piccadilly, for some three weeks. We were staying at an hotel in the neighbourhood. And just as I’d done on tour, I acted as a kind of nursemaid to Django. So as to persuade him to wash his hands, I pointed out to him that they were the focal point of the audience’s interest. After cutting his nails for him I bought him a nail-brush and taught him how to use it. At the time he didn’t even know what it was for. And when it was time to leave for work I had to help him get dressed and knot his tie for him to make sure he’d be presentable.’

7

The Founding of the String Quintet

Though still a vagabond, whimsical and eccentric, Django Reinhardt had slowly come into contact with the world of intellectuals and the better-known jazz musicians. Primitive and artist at one and the same time, he was to be met in the least likely quarters of the metropolis: strolling majestically along the streets, his guitar beneath his arm; or lolling back impressively in a Rolls-Royce that was driven by a chauffeur in full livery.

In 1954 occurred the most important event of his life: the forming of his own band.

At this point the name of the Hot Club de France crops up for the first time. This society, which had been in existence since December 1932, when it was founded by a few jazz enthusiasts to foster the development of the idiom, organized concerts featuring the best performers that were available, French or American, in any halls that happened to be going at the right price. And now we must have recourse to the memories of Pierre Nourry, the club's secretary. 'In the spring of 1935,' he recalls, 'Emile Savitry advised me to listen to a gipsy guitarist he knew who he felt would be a major draw at our concerts. He'd told me where his caravan was parked, near the Porte de Choisy, and I had no difficulty finding it. This guitarist turned out to have no guitar, but I was struck by the excellent selection of records he owned, and we fixed up to meet at Savitry's place, where he promised to come with his brother to play. So we got together again in Savitry's studio where we drank a glass or two of wine and everything went off very well. When Savitry asked me for my opinions I suggested taking Django into a recording studio, since I thought it would be interesting to learn the views of the leading critics of the day. I had all the trouble imaginable finding a bassist to accompany the two brothers and eventually ended up with Juan Fernandez, who came from Martinique. We made three records with the eighty francs I had available; I sent one to Hugues

Panassie, one to John Hammond in the States, and the third to Jost Van Praag and Niesen in the Netherlands. However, with the exception of the Dutchman, all the replies were unfavourable. Despite this setback, I'd already grown convinced of Django's talent and disregarding the experts' judgments I featured Django in the concerts the Hot Club organized during the winter of 1933.'

Having learnt that Andres Segovia was in Paris for a while, Michel Prunieres, one of the Hot Club officials, organized a reception at his father's – the latter edited the *Revue Musicale* – so as to present Django to the famous Spanish guitarist. Django came with his brother and played a few numbers but none seemed to impress the distinguished guest very much.

In the report of his first concert, Jacques Bureau wrote in *Jazz Tango* (February 1934):

'It might be said that he was the revelation of the concert. He is a curious musician, with a style like no one else's...We now have a great improviser in Paris...Moreover, Reinhardt is a charming fellow who seems to offer in his mode of existence the same whimsical imagination that illumines his solos: judge for yourself, he has chosen to live in a caravan, which enables him to travel without leaving home...'

We find the two brothers again at the Bal des Eleves de l'Ecole Centrale, held on Saturday, March 3.

'It was the living end when André Ekyan, Jungo Reinhardt, his brother and Al Romans joined Big Boy's band...it was delirium incarnate, delirium that lasted late into the night.'↓

≡ *Jazz Tango*, April 1934.

There was also another concert that took place on Sunday morning. Three well-known trumpeters were scheduled to appear, but when the concert was due to start not a single musician had arrived, so Nourry leapt into his little car and drove off to look for replacements. He returned with the two Reinhardts and other performers who had not figured on the original programme for the concert.

The idea of a group with Django as its leader was already in the air. Pierre Nourry had discussed the project with Emile Savitry and Django,

who dreamed of playing with a string ensemble. Moreover, the energetic Secretary-General had visions of launching a band under the aegis of the Hot Club de France that would be made up only of French musicians. This project was to reach fruition in the autumn, favoured, it must be said, by circumstances. Louis Vola had been commissioned to form a band to play at the Hotel Claridge at tea-time. 'There were fourteen of us,' he says. 'Marcel Raymond and Pierre Dorsey on pianos; Francis Luca on bass; lofty Gaby Bart at the drums; Django and Roger Chaput on guitars; three saxophonists, Alix Combelle, 'Coco' Kiehn and Max Blanc; Alex Renard on trumpet; two violinists, Sylvio Schmidt and Stéphane Grappelly; and Bert Marshall the singer. I didn't play myself.'

'Django came when he felt like it. When he didn't come, he sent his brother along. But since there was Roger Chaput too, I was always certain of having at least one guitarist. There was also a tango band, and when it was on the stand, our musicians used to go backstage to smoke a cigarette or to chat in the empty hall. Here it was that the first photograph of the quintet was taken with the singer Marshall.'

'Django used to get behind a screen,' Grappelly recalls, taking up the tale again. 'You know what he was like. He'd retreat into a corner and leave the communication of his thoughts to his guitar, I suppose. Sometimes he would pluck the strings as his fancy took him. At others he would lean on his instrument, and stare thoughtfully into space through an open window with that melancholic look of his. I still didn't know him very well. Sometimes I'd sit down at his side to listen to him. One day, to amuse myself, I picked up my violin and started to play with him. He asked me to play a little riff that he'd just put together. The effect pleased both of us and we went on to play some more tunes. The next day we waited impatiently for the intermission so that we could go and play backstage again. It was *Dinah* we played, I can remember quite clearly. We went on and on! Maybe we played for half an hour or so. Roger Chaput, an artist if ever there was one, soon hastened to join us, followed by friend Vola, inquisitive as a caretaker, as always, who had gone off to fetch his bass.'

That is how this 'Quartet', which some months later was to become the 'Quintet of the Hot Club de France', came into being. The sessions grew more and more frequent. Soon they were something of a rite. They were even held in the early hours after work at the Alsace a Montmartre, the restaurant in the Rue Fontaine where musicians used to meet for the last

time before going home to bed. They played for the sheer joy of it, without any set programme, improvising on jazz classics, popular hits or tunes that Django had composed. They rehearsed this or that introduction Django or Stéphane had demonstrated for them. And they did all this without thinking that the band might one day be a regular unit.

‘But I could see something was worrying Django,’ Stéphane goes on. ‘And when I asked him what the trouble was one day, he replied: ‘It doesn’t matter all that much. It’s just that when you’re playing, Stéphane, you’ve got both Chaput and me backing you, but when I’m soloing I’ve only got one guitar behind me!’

‘He hadn’t said that nastily, but he’d said it all the same. And since he asked me what I thought, I replied: ‘All right, then, let’s have your brother Joseph!’

‘During the talks we’d had before, Django and I had never spoken of forming a band. Most of the time Django would describe his card games, his prowess at billiards and his love for the countryside. He liked nothing better, he’d often say, than to sit on the banks of a stream with a rough-and-ready fishing rod, with which he was astonishingly skilful.’

The musicians, however, didn’t believe their unit could be a commercial success and events very nearly proved them right. Not a single record company was interested in their music! Eventually the Odeon concern offered them an audition; it was agreed they would record a few trial sides. Without very much confidence, the musicians met one afternoon at Chez Florence to rehearse seriously. Then on the appointed day they all piled into a cab and drove off to the Rue Albert. Nobody was quite sure what they were going to record, and since Chaput found he had the sheet-music of one of the most recent American hits in his pocket, they took rapid advantage of the short journey to rehearse it. They even had the coloured vocalist, Marshall, come along; Django thought ‘it’d be more commercial that way’!

Once in the studio, the musicians grouped themselves round the microphone and began to play, to the astonishment of the engineers, who asked discreetly what kind of music it was they were making. Django, unfortunately, overheard this remark and decided to leave the studio on the spot. Only with the greatest difficulty was he persuaded to stay until the two test sides had been recorded – the two wax platters on which the fate of the quintet seemed to hang. Impatiently, they waited for them to arrive. When they did, the musicians were delighted; they were hearing themselves play

for the first time. There followed, alas, the icy decision of the executives: 'The administrative committee has agreed that the records your band has made are far too modern.'

The musicians were cruelly disappointed; but the incident by no means cooled the enthusiasm of the energetic Nourry, who had already arranged an opening concert at the Ecole Normale on December 2.

'I'd intended to present a young singer called Ray Leda and had asked Django to get a band together to back her. But she didn't turn up at the rehearsal at Chez Florence. Besides Django, there was Stéphane Grappelly, Louis Vola, Nin-Nin, Roger Chaput, and two or three other guitarists whose names I've forgotten. I had a quiet word with Django and persuaded him to limit the number of rhythm guitarists to two. The vocalist's failure to show up may have disorganized our concert, but it did have the fortunate consequence of enabling us to present the new quintet.'

The publicity material for this concert shows that Django was still written Djungo and that the string ensemble had not yet been christened the Quintet of the Hot Club de France. Their first appearance was so successful that it was immediately decided to hold a second session on February 16.

'I was a little dubious about giving the name of the Hot Club de France to the group,' Nourry goes on. 'Stéphane was none too keen on it; Django, on the other hand, was agreeable; and all in all, I don't think there's been any cause to regret it. The title probably helped to launch the band, but the quintet has paid back its debt a hundredfold, for if the name of the Hot Club doesn't count for very much today, that of the Quintet of the Hot Club de France is still known the world over.'

The small record firm Ultraphone seemed ready to chance recording the quintet. After some delicate pourparleys, the unit made its first two discs in December. On a foggy morning the musicians wended their way into the enormous, ill-lit hangar on the Avenue du Maine which served as a studio. 'I remember you gave me a hundred sous to buy a can of petrol, so that I could drive the band there,' Louis Vola tells me. Littered with benches and equipment, it was more like a provincial palace of varieties backstage than a recording studio. The five musicians seemed lost in this great barracks of a place. In point of fact, the great wooden building was an organ factory and it was here that Gabriel Pierne made his records. Once they had regained their confidence the session went off without any untoward incidents, except at the end of *Dinah* when Stéphane's bow accidentally hit against the

bridge. The engineers wanted to make the side again, but everyone else refused to do so, deeming that it was impossible to make a better job of it.

Once they had been paid, the musicians lingered in the nearby Montparnasse streets for some time, carrying their instruments under their arms. They particularly relished this relaxation, after an event whose importance they may well have realized. As for Django, he seemed to have something altogether different on his mind, and dawdled about in front of the hatters' windows. When they came to the Boulevard St Germain he disappeared suddenly without any warning, and just as they had begun to search for him, made his appearance again wearing a magnificent felt hat. As white as the driven snow, it made a shocking contrast with his swarthy countenance, unshaven beard, open collar and shapeless suit...Almost certainly he had made one of his dreams come true by buying a real Stetson, made in the USA, which had swallowed up every penny of the fee he had just been paid! However, there were no fortunes to be made from records, as the following letter from the Ultraphone Company regarding the musicians' fees shows:

Societe Ultraphone franchise
46 rue de la Bienfaisance
Paris, 8eme
December 26, 1934

Monsieur Pierre Nourry
15 rue du Conservatoire
Paris.

Dear Sir,

I shall not attempt to conceal that I am somewhat taken aback by the exorbitant demands of the musicians in your quintet.

Perhaps you are unaware that the normal fee currently paid to first-class jazz soloists never exceeds 150 francs for each three-hour session at which six sides are generally made.

On that basis the demands of the three supporting musicians far exceed the usual fees. Naturally I am not speaking of Grappelly.

The most favourable conditions I can contemplate are as set out below:

1. For the three accompanists (two guitarists and a double-bassist), an outright payment of 50 francs per side.
2. For Grappelly, an outright payment of 50 francs per side.
3. For Reinhardt, a royalty of 5 per cent and 50 francs royalty advance on each side recorded.

In view of the probable commercial value of the suggested recordings, you will understand that I cannot commit my company to paying fees that mean there would be no profit even when five hundred records had been produced.

I rely on you to give your artistes a more realistic idea of the fees they can expect to receive.

Yours faithfully,
Société Ultraphone française,
Caldairou (signed)

What a magnificent revenge the quintet was to wreak on this preposterous document!

It might have been expected that the quintet's first records would have passed unheeded, but on the contrary they caused something of a sensation. Critics who were usually indifferent or even hostile to jazz were struck by the elegance and wit of this music. A great number of the records were sold and people were always asking whether new ones had been issued. Agreed, it was not yet a question of international fame, the variety halls and America, but for a jazz group it was an unprecedented departure. One should bear in mind that up to then this form of music had been considered 'a cacophony', 'a series of discords'; it was reserved for Negroes or, as was said, 'for savages', and whites only made themselves ridiculous by showing interest in it; after all, only a handful of fanatics were concerned with it. With the arrival of the quintet and the reassuring presence of string instruments, jazz became a more delicate music, one that could be more easily assimilated by outsiders.

For Django, it was a turning point in his life: he became aware of his importance, and almost unwillingly began to think of himself as one of the prominent figures of the non-gipsy world. This change coincided with a romance which was to hasten his transformation. Until then he had remained a typically grimy gipsy whose physical attractions and natural dignity set him apart from his fellows; but his total lack of good manners, his attire, and, above all, his wild and whimsical nature had made it difficult to introduce him to people in polite society.

It was at Stage B on the Boulevard du Montparnasse, where he had been working since November with Arthur Briggs, Alix Combelle, Stéphane and Georges Marion, that he got to know a blonde hostess with whom he fell in love. For days on end he was away from his room in Montmartre, his wife and his monkey. The strange new life he led with her had effects that were as enduring as they were beneficial. In the space of a few months, he acquired an elegant bearing, decided to dress in the approved manner and, to put it briefly, sought to be smart and refined. Soon, though, he was back in his little room in the Place Emile-Goudeau, on the slopes of the Butte, back with his wife and monkey who were quite accustomed to his sudden absences.

Ah! Those Montmartre hotel rooms!

The foreigner who frequents Gay Paree sees only the blazing neon signs along the Rue Pigalle or the Rue Fontaine, where the cabarets jostle each other for space. For some people Montmartre is the gleaming white Sacre-Coeur which looms above the city; for others it is the social round, with money flowing as freely as champagne, the easily-approachable 'Parisienne'...or the women who hang about street-corners, the dance-halls, the dancers, the entertainers, the famous painters whose studios are to be found next to the most sordid hotels imaginable. But like those of Marseille, or any other town, the Montmartre hotel rooms are small and square, their flowered or striped wallpaper torn in places. A yellow or red satin eiderdown covers the bed; net curtains hang drearily down each side of the window, through which more dust than light comes in. The faded covers are flecked with cigarette burns. The enormous cupboard holds all the tenant's belongings and in a shady corner a screen masks off the washbasin.

The only distinctive feature of Django's room was the vast amount of light that flooded in. The window opened on to a long balcony from which you could see the greyish roofs of lower Montmartre, whose red chimneys cut into the capital's smoky horizon like the battlements of some ancient castle. Behind the screen, where a kitchen of sorts had been rigged up, the monkey spent the better part of each day unearthing the remains of meals. What trouble this monkey caused! Django would never agree to part with it despite the complaints of the hotel manager. One day it would be eating soap, the next floorcloth! 'When are you going to get rid of that menagerie of yours?' the boss would ask him threateningly, but Django replied only by shrugging his shoulders, though he might mumble 'What a peasant!' between his teeth. And when he left the hotel, as though to avenge himself, he omitted to pay the money he owed. However, when the boss had regained his temper he told his customers: 'Ah! If you knew what a state they left that room in! But I'm proud to have put up that famous gipsy who plays the guitar so well!'

Django stayed at Stage B for five months. The most famous jazz musicians were to be seen there. Coleman Hawkins spent entire nights playing and drinking there and Louis Armstrong came in several times during the few months he stayed in Paris. Django, who never asked anyone the slightest favour, asked Louis to play for him. But Louis refused. It seems that he has never played except on stage.

It was not here, though, that Django met the great trumpeter for the first time. That event had taken place in the autumn of 1934. Louis Armstrong was living in a smart flat in the Rue de la Tour d'Auvergne, and Django, who had not yet made the sides with the quintet, was all agog to meet the 'King of Jazz', convinced that Louis would sign him on and take him back with him to America as soon as he heard him! An interview was carefully arranged. Armstrong was played the only disc then on hand, Jean Sablon's *Le Jour Oil Je Te Vis*, with a guitar solo. Without evincing any marked enthusiasm, Louis agreed to meet Django, who came along all on edge, flanked by his brother. After hasty introductions Louis announced that he had been invited out to dinner and had to get changed in a hurry. The two musicians were waiting for their host to ask them to play; as for Louis, he crossed the room now and again, wearing that well-known silk stocking on his head. At last we persuaded Django to play: we were sure the sound of his guitar would claim the attention of the great trumpeter.

However, it was all in vain that Django, backed by his brother, swept through endless choruses; Armstrong, preoccupied by his toilet, kept rushing across the room to fetch a shirt or a tie: only once did we hear a 'Very good! Go on!' emerge from the dressing-room. Django was mortified. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. And it was an utterly dejected little delegation – the two brothers, Pierre Nourry and I – that made its way down the ill-lit staircase.

'One evening, though,' Grappelly recalls, 'when we'd just got back to our place in Montmartre, 'Brick Top', the famous cabaret hostess, telephoned to say that Louis was at her place. It must have been about five in the morning and she asked Django to come and accompany Armstrong. Naturally, Django and I set off at once, and for the only time in my life I heard Louis sing, accompanied only by Django's guitar. There were no discussions to decide what key they'd play in or what tunes they'd choose. Louis began and Django followed him in the twinkling of an eye. It was a revelation for me, and all of us were entranced.'

As for Coleman Hawkins, he immediately showed himself to be aware of Django's talent and liked to play with him. 'One evening,' Alix Combelle relates, 'he came and sat in with us. He stopped playing only when the club closed.' And Stéphane Grappelly adds: 'Hawkins improvised continuously on *Sweet Sue* for an hour and a half.'

The musicians liked Stage B a lot. 'The work was hard,' Grappelly goes on. 'We played without a stop from ten until four in the morning for ninety francs a night, but we had a whale of a time. The music was good because we could play what we liked. The place had one of the best atmospheres I've ever worked in.'

'When I was asked to form a band,' adds Arthur Briggs, 'I hesitated to approach Django. Not only was I unable to offer him a sizeable fee, but everyone I'd spoken to about signing him on had warned me against it. 'You're crazy, my friend,' Louis Vola had said. 'Django will never be there for work. He comes only when he feels like it.' Nonetheless Django accepted the terms I offered him on condition that he could play as he thought fit. He even dropped a gentle hint that he might have to be away accompanying Jean Sablon, for instance, or out on the open road in his caravan. But to my great astonishment Django rarely failed to turn up and in the long run I had nothing to reproach him with. After work was over Django would often come along to Le Dome for a drink, and whilst we were chatting he'd entertain us with a veritable guitar recital.'

To return to the quintet, on February 5 it took part, at the direction of Ultraphone's manager, in the Record and Radio Gala which was held at the Theatre des Champs Elysees. 'It was an absolute scandal,' Louis Vola recalls. 'The quintet was due to go on after Marianne Oswald, who had a dreadful reception with everyone whistling in derision! 'We'll have to dig our heels in,' I said to the band as we were going on to the stage, 'because we're going to get a terrible hiding.' While we were playing, the audience kept on whispering and Django began to get discouraged. I tried to get him going as best I could with my accompaniment. We came out intact! But for some time it remained our worst disappointment.'

The quintet gave its first provincial concert. A modest forerunner of the continental tours that were to follow, it had been organized by a few fanatical enthusiasts of the Nancy Hot Club. When the train drew into the station there was an enormous crowd waiting, and Louis Vola, always something of a joker, called Django over to the window to show him the magnificent welcome that had been staged in their honour. Django went pale with pride and joy, but in point of fact the crowd was waiting for a high-ranking ecclesiastical dignitary and the musicians had all the trouble in the world to find the few supporters who had come to meet them.

‘After we’d dropped in at our hotel,’ Vola relates, ‘our hosts took us out to dinner at Schmidt’s in the Place Stanislas. What a slap-up meal they’d laid on! *Hors d’oeuvre*, trout, sparrows, a whole stack of stuff – it was wonderful! The menu at fifteen francs, and, believe me, that was a tidy sum in those days!

“Everything all right for tonight?’ I asked the organizers. ‘You’ve got plenty of seats booked?’

“Oh yes, we’ve already got more than a hundred people coming!’

‘As it turned out we preferred to pay for the meal ourselves.’

‘After dinner,’ Grappelly continues, ‘we set off for the concert hall. And just as we were about to begin playing we saw Vola put down his double-bass and shout to us to wait. And off he went to the back of the stage to close the piano lid, doubtless to make sure the strings didn’t vibrate too much. It was a bit dampening, I must confess.’

The concert was held before a small audience of jazz enthusiasts...and cost its organizers their record collections, which they had to sell to cover their losses.

Three days later, on February 23, 1955, the quintet took part in the concert Coleman Hawkins gave at the Salle Pleyel and finally received the blessing of the public at large.

8

Stéphane Grappelly

Stéphane Grappelly's long association with Django Reinhardt, both as man and musician, makes it imperative to devote a chapter to him. Stéphane was born in Paris on January 26, 1908, and began to study music at the age of ten, starting on the harmonium. He was soon learning the violin and studying harmony, and gained a first prize for solfeggio at the Paris Conservatoire.

Since his parents had moved to Strasbourg, Stéphane had to earn enough money to keep up his studies by working as a pianist in pit orchestras. One day a musician who lived near him fell ill and asked him to take his place in the band at the Gaumont Theatre on the boulevards. It was there he made his debut as a violinist, but the work took up too much of his time and he soon had to abandon his studies.

In 1924 he met a guitarist who suggested he work a summer season with him at Wimereux, with two guitarists and a banjoist, a group which seems a genuine precursor of the famous string quintet! Back in Paris, he started to work at the Palais Roche-chouart, but after a fortnight his violin was stolen. Not daring to tell his father, he took a job as errand boy to a laundrywoman and after that worked for a florist and then a hatter. However, when he was delivering a hat one day, he was recognized by one of the guitarists with whom he had played the summer before. He advised him to return to his former profession and lent him a hundred francs to buy a new violin.

The guitarist in question earned his living playing in courtyards and restaurants. They would play a few polkas or a waltz or two, and whilst one of them picked up the coppers the other would play Toselli's *Serenade* or some other favourite. Stéphane admits the restaurants proved none too lucrative, for the two friends played too badly, so they concentrated on the courtyards. This paid off quite well and they used to travel to work by taxi. One day Stéphane's partner asked him to replace him at a dancing school. It

was there, to his great surprise, that he heard a musician play pleasing chords for the first time, chords to which he was really unaccustomed. This pianist was Stephen Mougin. After working side by side the whole evening they got talking together. Once Mougin learnt that Stéphane was working the courtyards, he put it to him that he would do better to play at students' dances instead. It was there that Stéphane was to meet the men who were later to become the lions of French jazz: Leon Vauchant, Philippe Brun, André Ekyan. He can still recall Ekyan scraping together the money for his first saxophone which he learnt to play in less than a week. At that time Ekyan was studying dental surgery and like many other students was always flat broke. No handyman, he was always hard put to it to keep his equipment in good order and his pallid complexion and pimples were a sorry sight indeed. Already, however, he was possessed of the extraordinary will-power that was rapidly to make him the best alto saxophonist in France.

It was not polkas or serenades that Grappelly played for the students, but jazz. He too was discovering a marvellous new world where his talents were to find the scope they needed to develop. After Stéphane had worked in the Latin Quarter, Philippe Brun, for whom he had played, fixed him a job with Gregor and his Gregorians. The band travelled to South America and also worked on the Côte d'Azur. One day one of his colleagues who remembered hearing him play the violin lent him his instrument. Gregor was so impressed that he had him moved from the piano bench to the string section. Then came the Croix du Sud, where he met Django Reinhardt for the first time, and the Claridge where they began to play regularly together, preparing the ground for the quintet whose fame was to spread around the world.



When he linked up with Django, Stéphane too was bound to no one, leading a random sort of life. This, perhaps, was the only thing the two musicians had in common. Their characters, moreover, were so very different that only an exceptionally close musical *entente* was to preserve their partnership down through the years.

When the two men got to know each other, Stéphane Grappelly was what is commonly known as a 'ladies' man', poised and naturally elegant, his slimness making him appear tall. His conversation was amusing, often extremely witty. At that time he was reputed to be something of a miser,

and many are the stories that illustrate that aspect of his character. Best of all, perhaps, is the one Django told us. Once when the two of them were driving through the London streets in a pea-souper Stéphane finally decided to switch his headlights on, exclaiming 'To hell with avarice!'

It is evident that an unclouded friendship between such a person and the generous and proud gipsy was out of the question. Their relations were sometimes strained, but they went on working together, for from the musical standpoint Django had found in Stéphane Grappelly an ideal interpreter, a partner beyond compare. It was a truly miraculous partnership, Django discerning in Stéphane a unique performer, possessing qualities which he himself lacked, whilst Grappelly, with his feminine nature, open to persuasion, sensitive, saw in Django the decision and inventiveness that made him one of the most inspired improvisers jazz has ever produced.

What a curious phenomenon we have in Stéphane Grappelly, whose apparently superficial character is belied by his playing, which is unbelievably consistent in its purity. Essentially a relaxed and natural player, he is unaffected by physical considerations, and his work always shows a marvellous purity of inspiration. His style is extraordinarily elegant, perfect in its form and impeccable from the viewpoint of technique. The distinctive tone and vibrato of each of his phrases stems from his delicate sensibility and confers on his playing a gracefulness and emotional appeal which make him a superb soloist. A musician to the core, he reacted with tremendous speed and Django found in him an improviser who could instantly translate the ideas he hinted at with a series of chords on the guitar, and could even anticipate them, by intuition as it were. In Django, on the other hand, Grappelly had fallen upon a man who could bring his latent gifts to the surface, making him play at his peak and constantly revealing new possibilities to him. We shall see how it was one of Django's most extraordinary talents that he could bring an artist's true temperament out into the open and by dint of an appropriate accompaniment expose each and every one of his qualities.

It seems likely that had it not been for Django, Stéphane Grappelly would never have grown into the outstanding soloist who reached maturity in the quintet. Indeed, had it not been for Django, Stéphane would never really have discovered himself.

9

The Early Days of the Quintet

The quintet's records were now beginning to win it an international reputation; with its success, Django's transformation continued, for he was now leading a life that was far more settled and obliged him to work more regularly. True, he would still escape from his responsibilities at times and return to the open road, but such escapades were now but fleeting episodes. Usually he would confine himself to taking a few musicians from the quintet along to celebrate some important Romany festival, arriving almost as a visitor, as the guest of honour who had come to acknowledge the respect his 'cousins' felt for one of their own kind who had become famous amongst the 'peasants'. His newly-acquired fame only strengthened the hold he had always had over his own people, who saw in him an illustrious example of their race, a chief. Whenever he appeared at a concert the picturesque dwellers of the zone would come not only to applaud their idol but also to share in his success.

Now that they had grown rarer, his appearances in 'the village' with Vola, Grappelly or some other musician provided an excuse for mammoth feasts. A high state of excitement prevailed, the old men gathering together to celebrate the return of the prodigal son whilst the women disappeared to see about the food that would be needed, returning laden with eatables whose origin was better left uncommented. A whole sheep's carcass would be roasted, chickens cooked by the dozen, and the tables would groan under the weight of bottles of wine, if all had gone according to plan. Festivities like these would last for several days, interrupted of necessity during working hours but starting all over again once evening came. The most amazing tales are told of the arrangements for these banquets, the way they were conducted, and their consequences. As drink followed food, and music drink, extravagant exploits would take place: gipsies were even known to sell their caravans on the spot in order to bestow extra liberalities on the

feast; but more often the gathering came to an end with indescribable fights between rival families, in the course of which all the furniture would be smashed to pieces. And dawn would find the guests sprawled in a drunken stupor in the ditches around, dreaming still of orgies that would never end.



One might have thought that the Quintet of the Hot Club de France, its initial successes behind it, would be working incessantly, appearing in halls throughout Paris and the provinces. Such was unfortunately very far from being the case. In the first place, jazz was not yet very popular; secondly, relations between the various members of the band always left a lot to be desired, especially between Django and Stéphane, who always had some bone of contention to gnaw at, relating to financial matters or questions of prestige. When one thinks, too, of their incompatibility of temperament, it is not surprising they never got over their mutual mistrust, except on a musical plane. For a long time the celebrated quintet was in reality a fiction and its survival depended on the sporadic activity of the officials of the Hot Club de France. In fact each of its members worked in a different club and a concert, recording session or overseas broadcast was needed to bring the five musicians together.

After Stage B, Django played for more than a month at the Villa d'Este with Freddy Taylor's band (March-April 1935). However, the quintet got together regularly for recording sessions or concerts staged by the Hot Club.↓ On June 13, Jean Tranchant headed the bill at the Salle Pleyel and asked to be backed by the quintet.

≡ February 16, 1935, at the Ecole Normale de Musique. July 7, 1935, at the Salle Hertz (Lafayette). December 6, 1935, at the Ecole Normale de Musique.

'It was a disaster!' Louis Vola admits. 'Jean Tranchant had had a fantastic idea.

"I want to have the quintet on-stage with me,' he explained to the house electricians. 'When I'm singing, you'll spotlight me and leave the quintet in the dark. And when it's their turn to play, you'll turn it on them. I don't want them to leave the stage.'

"Listen, Jean,' I said, cutting in. 'You're making a big mistake. Why don't you let us leave the stage? When we've left, everything will be fine and you'll be much more at ease.' But he stuck to his guns.

‘For *Attila! Es-Tu La?* (this was what one of his songs was called) he had asked for the lights to be changed from blue to red, then to green, and so on. Whilst this was happening, the quintet was in the dark: Django was fascinated by the changing colours; Stéphane had his back to the audience and was bent double with silent laughter. Nin-Nin was cleaning his nails with his plectrum. But ‘Barreau’ (Pierre Ferret) had his eyes fixed on Grappelly, and after restraining his mirth for a while, finally burst out into an enormous guffaw which naturally ruined the whole performance.’

Now, if I remember right, Pierre Nourry had learnt that the big American impresario Irving Mills was about to leave for London that very evening.

‘Why don’t you stay in Paris one more day?’ he had asked him. ‘The quintet of the Hot Club de France is due to appear at the Salle Pleyel tomorrow night with the singer Jean Tranchant. I assure you this will be a sensational show, and you might well be interested in it for the United States. You really must come along.’ So Irving Mills put back his departure for twenty-four hours and came along. And in the following week’s issue of the *Melody Maker* he wrote: ‘It is not enough to be an artist, one must be a gentleman too.’

It was only towards the end of the summer of 1935 that the quintet got its first chance to work regularly. Moises’ wife owned a cabaret in the Rue Fromentin, the Grand Ecart, which she was about to open under the name of the Nuits Bleues, with the billing:

‘DJUNGO REINHARDT, STEPHANE GRAPPELLE AND THEIR VIRTUOSOS.’

The event caused something of a stir, and drew a very fashionable clientele. ‘But as might be expected,’ Vola recalls, ‘Django wasn’t there the opening night. When he failed to arrive, one of us went along to his hotel, where he was resting quite peaceably. No amount of reasoning helped. Django was in bed. and set on staying there!’

‘The work was very hard,’ says Stéphane Grappelly, ‘especially for me, since I had to play the piano when the quintet was resting. There was no dancing. It was a little like a concert: something of an innovation in France. We had any number of famous visitors who came along just to hear us play. Benny Carter, who was working at Chez Florence, sometimes sat in on

piano. But the boss couldn't understand that a first-class band had to break off now and again and he had the impression we were unsuccessful.'

In the first year or two records were made for foreign labels, and very irregularly at that. Polydor organized a session and the records came out as by Stéphane Grappelly and his Hot Four. Finally, the quintet's exclusive contract with Ultraphone expired and they recorded for the Gramophone concern. In the meantime the band began to tour in foreign countries. After the unfortunate trip to Nancy came the journey to Barcelona in January 1936. Since the quintet was set to appear at three concerts with Benny Carter it was necessary to bring the musicians together, dispersed as they were throughout the length and breadth of France. Telegrams were sent to Stéphane Grappelly, who flew from Monte Carlo to join the other members of the band at Barcelona. Such was their success that they had to give double the number of concerts originally planned, each time before a madly enthusiastic audience.

'We had a magnificent reception,' Grappelly recalls, 'marked by all the warmth and enthusiasm the Spaniards are capable of. Believe me, after each concert, hats rained down on to the stage as though it were a bullfight. It was wonderful!' When they came to leave, though, it was learnt that the organizer had disappeared with all the takings! Without so much as a brass farthing in their pockets our musicians took the train home, only a miserable Catalonian sausage to chew on between the five of them! Their only consolation was the memory of the applause and the critical acclaim the concerts received.

'...one of the best groups in Europe' (*La Publicidad*).

'...these artistes prove that the quality of a good jazz performance is independent of the nature of the instruments used. Style, in fact, has the last word, and these men have it in abundance' (*La Publicidad*).

'The violinist Grappelly and the guitarist Reinhardt are two outstanding members of the band. From the viewpoint of internal balance the quintet is a perfect group' (*L'Instant*, Barcelona).

Yet apart from one or two engagements in the Montmartre cabarets, such as the Monico or Brick Top, the quintet's career was an intermittent one. Django appeared at a few Hot Club concerts or took part in this or that recording session.

'It was probably that summer,' recalls Savitry (we are now in 1936), 'that Marco engaged Django for the season at St Jean-de-Luz. Django had

left his guitar with him and had promised he would be there on the opening day. When it arrived, Marco was a trifle anxious, for he'd had no news of Django for several weeks. The train from Paris arrived without him. The tea dance was just about to begin when to everybody's surprise an enormous coupe lurched to a halt outside. The door opened and in walked Django!

'Django had come with his wife and brother, but if he'd bought a car he had neither spare strings – those famous metal strings he loved so much – nor a plectrum. And his brother, who usually looked after such details, had also forgotten all about them. Inevitably one or two strings broke and by the time the season was drawing to a close he'd already been playing a whole week with only two strings on the guitar! As I say, he'd forgotten his plectrum too. And he worked the whole season with a tooth from a comb – the large one at the end. How he could manage to play at all with a tooth that was so pointed and so difficult to get a grip on I've never been able to understand.'

A room had been booked for him in the best hotel; but Django, who liked to walk about barefoot, could not abide the luxurious carpets that covered the floor and preferred to take a small furnished room with bare boards in town. He left just as he had arrived, at the steering wheel of his big Peugeot, without a driving licence, absolutely uninsured, and not giving a damn; but with an enormous cap shading his eyes, a deep suntan and his red silk scarf round his neck.

An extract from the *Jazz Hot* for January 1937 reports that 'Django Reinhardt was seen on highway N°7, at kilometre post 489, near Lyon.'

Since the autumn, in fact, Django, seized once again by nostalgia for the open road, had been making a long tour in a caravan: which is why the quintet appeared in Zurich in November without him. The following winter found the quintet together again at the Don Juan. There was still a good deal of tension between the musicians: we are not alluding so much on this occasion to Django and Stéphane, who were to be continually at loggerheads throughout their career, as to Joseph. Up till then his big brother's skivvy, the faithful bearer of his guitar, the provider of spare strings, he suddenly felt revolt stirring within his breast, and probably realizing that his talents had been unjustly neglected, sought to break free from his servitude.

Things came to a head on the eve of New Year's Day 1937, after the band had dined amply at Django's place, together with the inevitable

monkey and a few gipsies, Django's 'cousins'. Emboldened by the wine which was flowing freely, Joseph made it plain that he meant to stand for no more nonsense. The two of them came to blows. Soon the whole band was at it, and only the authority of their mother, hastily called to the spot, could suffice to separate the two brothers, who together with the rest of the quintet finished the night off at the local police station.

Not until the following spring was the quintet active again. His Master's Voice had asked the Gramophone Company to record eighteen sides by the group and these were made on April 21, 22, 26 and 27, 1937; advantage was also taken of this opportunity to record two violin solos by Grappelly, whilst Django waxed his first two unaccompanied solos, *Improvisation* and *Parfum*.

Coleman Hawkins was due to come the day after and a recording session had been arranged with Benny Carter, Alix Combelle, Andre Ekyan, Django and Grappelly.

'It was a wonderful slice of luck for us,' avers Alix Combelle, 'perhaps less so for Andre Ekyan, who was already well known, to have the chance to play with men who were currently considered the greatest jazz saxophonists of them all. Needless to say, we were right on our toes. I can remember that after the first take of *Crazy Rhythm*, Benny said to Coleman, 'Man, that ain't the way it should go!', as if to make him realize he'd have to get down to it. Obviously neither of them had anything to gain from this encounter whilst we had nothing to lose. I daresay that's why the record came off so well.'

After the record date, the four saxophonists often had the chance to get together again at those memorable jam sessions which were held in the early hours at the Swing Time, a cabaret Andre Ekyan had opened in the Rue Fromentin. 'If my memories of that period are very hazy on the whole,' Alix Combelle relates, 'I can remember the jam sessions at the Swing Time as if they'd taken place only yesterday. Ekyan was then playing with Leo Chauliac and Georges Marion. Coleman Hawkins had been in Paris for a few days and in the early hours after work we used to get together for a chat at the bar of the cabaret, with Benny Carter, who was then appearing at Chez Florence, Django and Bill Coleman. Once the last customers had left and the doors had been closed we'd start to play...

'Make no mistake about it, those were real jam sessions, not artificial ones, laid on to please someone, or to try to recreate something. You were

really making something new when you played in those jam sessions. Now, of course, they're a thing of the past. If I say that, it's because I've heard a good number of them over the years and still hear them from time to time: jam session settings, perhaps, organized jam sessions, if you like; but they've got nothing to do with the genuine article.

'You can always tell a real jam session: the musicians play six or it may be ten choruses because each one of them has its own *raison d'être*, because the tenth chorus just has to be there, since the ninth has led up to it absolutely logically. Improvising doesn't just consist in stating the theme in the first chorus, embroidering upon it in the second and getting right away from it in the third by means of a technical exercise. That's not what I call developing a solo. No, as far as these jam sessions were concerned, the solos really were developed, in the proper sense of the word: the fourth chorus was the fourth chorus, and it would have been impossible to substitute the ninth or the third for it.

'If a soloist found he was short of ideas at the end of the third chorus, well, he'd stop to let one of his friends play. On the other hand, if he felt during the third chorus that his invention was flowing freely, what we used to call 'real gone', then he'd go on playing till he'd said his piece. In that case the number of choruses didn't matter. If you follow me, it's the same as drinking. You count the first two or three glasses, but after the fourth, it doesn't matter, you're 'away', and you don't count any more. That's the real jam session, if you like!

'We weren't out to cut each other, only to create the best possible climate, in a sincere and good-hearted spirit of rivalry. There was one evening when the session was really out of the ordinary. I'd been playing for about an hour and had stopped, not because I was downhearted, because I'm not that sort. I'd stopped because I was enjoying myself more listening than I was playing. It was going like a bomb! You wouldn't believe it! Each player was on top form. The atmosphere was terrific. And everything was coming off, as sometimes happens only once in a man's life. I know that as far as I was concerned that session just couldn't have been better. I'll never forget it.

'In the end, Django came out on top. I remember that at one point they began to play a pop number (the young musicians play it today as part of their repertoire), *I Won't Dance*. It's a tune that modulates incessantly and the release is pretty hard. They'd chosen it just to see how far each of them

could go with it. They were amusing themselves playing it in a variety of different keys. And I can remember quite clearly that Bill Coleman was the first to give up. It was fantastic! After Bill, it was Hawkins.

‘Only Benny Carter and Django were left to battle it out.

‘Benny played in almost every key with typical relaxation, without once giving up the ghost. But Django played just as well in every key you could think of, and not once did he make a mistake. He was really unbeatable. We all took our hats off to him that night. A general outburst of laughter hailed his exploits. It was just beyond us.

‘What was so unusual about Django was that he just couldn’t play out of tune or stumble in any way. Music came naturally to him. The right notes and the right chords seemed to fall beneath his fingers in a perfectly natural way.’

Obviously that was true of Benny Carter or Hawkins, too, but not to the same degree.



1937 was the year of the Exhibition. Numerous tourists were expected in Paris. Brick Top opened a new cabaret in the Rue Pigalle, called The Big Apple, where the quintet worked regularly for a long time. All the leading lights of Paris came there, and distinguished foreign visitors, too, like President Roosevelt’s son, who had just got married, or the celebrated English conductor Constant Lambert.

‘Just about everybody came to The Big Apple at one time or another,’ Stéphane recalls. ‘One night a customer came up to me after we’d played *In the Still of the Night*.

“Do you know,” he said, “I’ve just written a tune called *In the Still of the Night!*”

‘It was Cole Porter, the well-known song-writer. He’d just finished the musical *Rosalie*.

‘Every night I used to accompany a coloured singer whom Django loved listening to, and whose name he gave to one of his compositions, *Mabel* (Mercer).’

Like most of the American musicians who passed through, the violinist Eddie South was frequently to be seen there, for he enjoyed playing with Django immensely. Stéphane never seemed to take umbrage at this; as soon as the coloured violinist made his entrance, he’d scuttle off to a nearby bar where he could be found after midnight in a state of gentle euphoria.

Stéphane in any case was to prove he had nothing to envy his rival by recording several remarkable duets with him, together with the quintet.↓

≡ *Dinah* and *Daphne* are most interesting records which have Stéphane Grappelly and Eddie South sharing the solo honours and fully reveal their remarkable gifts.

The atmosphere between its two chief protagonists was far from ideal and one evening when the quintet was due to broadcast to the United States a catastrophe seemed inevitable. It was a dreadful evening, with the musicians really on edge. The technicians were fussing around the apparatus of the radio van which was parked outside The Big Apple. The broadcast was to be beamed across the Atlantic, forming part of an exceptional programme featuring the most famous American jazz groups. At last the time came. Five, four, three, two, one, zero... 'And now, from Paris,' the announcer said, 'you'll hear Stéphane Grappelly and his Hot Four!'

Django went white and rose to his feet. The band, not knowing what to do, stayed silent. Signs were made begging the other musicians to start and while the broadcasting was going on they convinced Django in undertones that it was all a mistake and amends would be made later in the programme. Django returned to his place in a fury, glaring at Stéphane even though it was in no way the latter's fault. He could hardly be held responsible for the American announcer's error, who presumably knew of the quintet through the records that had come out under Grappelly's name. Following this incident Django addressed not a single word to his colleague for weeks on end, and I am disposed to believe he bore him a grudge about it until his dying day.



When the Exhibition had finished, Pierre Nourry took advantage of some leave to organize a concert in the Salle Gaveau. Reynaldo Hahn and the conductor Albert Wolf were in the audience.

'The concert given by the Quintet of the Hot Club de France at the Salle Gaveau on October 20 was the finest jazz concert I've ever attended,' averred Hugues Panassie in the *Jazz Hot* (November-December 1937), and later added: 'How am I to express all the enthusiasm I felt for Django's compositions, such as his fantastic *Bolero*, his delightful *Caravan*, and many more? Django is not only a wonderful soloist and accompanist; he is also a very great composer.'

Following upon this event, the quintet began its foreign travels once more. Already, in July, it had undertaken a short Dutch tour, with a gala performance at the Schveningen Kurzaal during which Django was cut off in a corridor and besieged by several hundreds of autograph hunters. Since he found it so difficult to write, it took him more than an hour to get away! There followed concerts in The Hague and in Amsterdam, which left the musicians with pleasant memories of the Netherlands. Some visited the art galleries, others the Museum of Horrors, from which Django returned obsessed by the thought of the frightful tortures. They also spent many an evening playing with Coleman Hawkins at the Palace in Amsterdam where they came across Freddy Johnson and Benny Carter, with whom they had worked in Paris. On October 31 they came to Brussels, appearing as guests of honour at the amateur jazz band contest; Stéphane Grappelly was one of the judges of this event. The quintet also played at the dance which brought the proceedings to a close. It was the first time the quintet had played in Belgium, and one can imagine how successful they were, just as in The Hague where the quintet was also presented at the Dutch amateur band contest.

‘During the quintet’s brief Dutch tour,’ Jaap Sajet was to write, ‘there were some wonderful jam sessions with Django Reinhardt, Hawkins and Freddy Johnson. Mere words cannot suffice to describe them (*Jazz Hot*, December 1957).

‘Although Hawkins’ engagement at the Palace in Amsterdam was over, he came back to play in Django’s honour, together with Freddy Johnson and local drummer Maurice Van Kleef. The atmosphere was terrific’

Finally, they made their way back to Paris – broke as usual – trying in vain to work out how they had managed to get through so much money during a few days’ holiday.

As the reader has seen, the quintet’s career was seldom free of incident. The fan who bought the group’s latest discs in Birmingham or Marseilles was far from imagining just how precarious this assortment of personalities was. For years on end the celebrated quintet survived on the strength of its records and the occasional appearances it made in different European cities alone. France was too restricted a field; only foreign tours could enable it to work regularly and meet Django’s financial demands, which by this time were already exorbitant.

England offered the best working conditions and the quintet appeared there more often than anywhere else. After lengthy discussions, which had their basis in an exclusive contract with Decca, the quintet opened at the Cambridge Theatre in London on January 30, 1938. This concert was organized by the *Melody-Maker* and also featured the Mills Brothers and British bands. For the London public it was a revelation in the full sense of the word.

‘It is probably true to say that hardly any visitor at the concert was prepared for the real thrill we were all to get from this music’ This was how the *Melody Maker*’s reporter put it in his account of the splendid concert that was held on January 30. Django Reinhardt and Stéphane Grappelly were in more brilliant form than ever. All the tunes were loudly applauded but after they had played *Mystery Pacific*, *Bolero*, *Swing Guitars* and *Daphne*, enthusiasm gave way to delirium. It is worth noting that the concert had provoked so much interest that long before the event took place all the seats had been sold; and the seats had gone more quickly than for the concerts given by Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong and Benny Carter. Two recording dates were held soon afterwards. Outstanding amongst the sides made were *Night and Day*, which the group had never played before, a rare and delicate example of musical understanding, and *My Sweet*, which left the musicians helpless with laughter. It had been agreed that Django would speak during the recording to introduce Louis Vola. When the moment came he exclaimed: ‘Would Monsieur Solo like to take a Vola?’

One may well imagine that the presence of such a phenomenon as this band did not go unobserved in London, particularly at the Regent Palace Hotel, which the musicians had chosen as their headquarters. Eugene Vees, the gipsy, had just joined the quintet and it was the first time he had ventured forth into the civilized world. Completely out of his element in these strange surroundings, he delighted the rest of the band, who were vastly amused to see how ill at ease he was in the lifts or swing doors. They found it hard to contain their mirth when they saw the smartly attired staff terrified by this sorrowful rustic, who would wander round the corridors for hours on end searching for his room. As one might expect, he knew not a word of English; but what was worse, he was unable to read, and the hundreds of numbers he saw on the doors were no more than insoluble enigmas as far as he was concerned. You should have seen him, with his enormous hat jammed down on his skull and his swarthy countenance that

always looked as though it needed shaving! When he stood near well-dressed British gentlemen they would recoil in horror and carefully make room for him in the lifts, though the poor wretch had no idea what floor he needed.

As for Django, he was quite accustomed to hotels by now, and spent part of the day dozing away lazily, amusing himself by ringing for the maid, just to see how horrified she looked to find him still half naked in bed and unable to make himself understood. In the afternoon he would disappear mysteriously, rejoining his friends in the evening at Gennaro's, which had been chosen as an assembly point. These absences were explained later, when it was found that one of the drawers in his wardrobe was full of cigarettes. It was then Django told us that he had been going to a nearby amusement arcade, where his proverbial skill enabled him to win a packet of cigarettes every time. Looking through the other drawers we found that they too were crammed full with packets of cigarettes.

After a few days' relaxation the quintet returned to Paris and Django and Stéphane took part in many of the recording sessions the new label Swing had been organizing since the previous summer. Swing, it will be recalled, was the first gramophone company in the world to devote itself exclusively to jazz. There were also a few broadcasts and some concerts, including one at the Salle Gaveau with Fernandel on March 17, 1938, and another at the Ecole Normale on May 13. 'An outstanding feature of the evening was the unexpected appearance of Larry Adler, the well-known harmonica player, who displayed a fantastic sense of humour in his music' (H.P. *Jazz Hot*, June 1938).

The quintet recorded with Larry Adler, and since Adler's contract at the Alhambra was renewed for several weeks also accompanied him at this music-hall.

June 9: 'The famous coloured trumpeter and singer Vala'ida Snow scored a real triumph and Django Reinhardt's accompaniment was a pure delight as far as I was concerned' (H.P. *Jazz Hot*, June 1938).

Then, after engagements at Chez Florence and Studio 2, the quintet appeared at the first Nuit du Jazz (June 30, 1938), before returning to England where it began its first tour in the British Isles.

'Lew Grade had signed us on for a tour that was to last several weeks,' Grappelly recalls. 'The first concert was due to take place in Manchester; but we had to play without Django.' Eugene Vees, who also made the trip,

tells us why: 'Django left Paris by car, and when I asked him if he had his passport he replied: 'There's no need. We're well known over there.' But when we got to Folkestone, Django had been sent back to the Continent, and the impresario had to go over there and collect him. The quintet was invited to take part in a big gala show at the Kilburn State which was to feature all the stars then working in England. It was so large when you got inside that a fifteen-piece band could hardly be seen on the stage. Django refused to go on. 'It's not worth it,' he said, 'they won't even see us!' But the organizers wouldn't let us leave and we had to play. When we were on-stage and Grappelly was playing, Django said to me: 'Look in the front row, it's the American actor Eddie Cantor.' When we'd finished, Eddie Cantor, who'd stayed modestly in his seat throughout the whole show, rose to his feet and came up on the stage. When he reached Django he took his hand and kissed it, not in the least embarrassed by the audience.'

A few weeks later the quintet shared top billing with Tom Mix at the London Palladium. 'But if all London rushed to see the famous cowboy and his horse,' asserts Stéphane, 'I can say in all honesty that it was the quintet which saved the show.'

Naguine, who was never surprised by anything her husband did, tells us in turn: 'We'd taken a peer's flat opposite a big park, Hyde Park. One evening when I was walking round Soho I saw our Buick. I asked the chauffeur where Django was, but since he couldn't speak French, he had no way of telling me. It soon became clear that he knew where Django was, but didn't want to let on. So I went into the club across the road. The maître d'hotel, an Italian, recognized me and asked me, evidently embarrassed: 'But, Madame, where are you going? What is the matter?'

"I've come to get my husband. He's there, isn't he?"

"No, no..."

'And he took me by the waist and started to dance with me. It was then I knew something peculiar was afoot and they were playing for time. So I insisted: 'Tell me where he is, or else it'll be the worse for you!'

'Unable to find an answer, he replied: 'He's in there.'

'When I got to Django he was sitting at a table piled high with all manner of dishes, champagne on ice in a bucket, and goodness knows what besides. Django rose to his feet and came towards me.

"You're a woman, aren't you? Don't make a scene in here.'

“What do you think I’m going to do? I’ve got no strength left when you speak to me.’

‘So I went back to the flat, packed my bag and was off for Paris before you could say Jack Robinson. It was raining. The crossing was miserable. When I got to Paris I looked up Micheline Day and took a room in her hotel on the Rue Pigalle.’

Meanwhile Django was already packing, intent on rejoining his wife. Grappelly was at his wits’ end. ‘Do something about it, then, you lot,’ he was imploring. ‘If Django leaves, we’re all washed up!’ Django had decided to catch the train that very evening after the show. He was dreadfully nervous and took *Tiger Rag* at such a tempo that Nin-Nin’s plectrum began to melt!

Not knowing what to do next, Grappelly telephoned Naguine who had just reached Paris.

‘Naguine, my dear, you’ve just got to come back, Django wants to pack everything in. He’s off his head. He wants to abandon the tour. You must come. There’s the contract. We just can’t drop everything like this! We’ll never be able to pay all the money back...’

In the end, Naguine, who was a good sort, decided to catch the train back to England the next day. Everything was smoothed over and business was fairly good. Django took his big Buick back to France with him, complete with a chauffeur in white livery who was rumoured to have worked for an English nobleman previously. As one might expect, the first thing he did was to drive off to the Alsace a Montmartre to show the Paris musicians his car. He also went to see his innumerable cousins near the Porte de Montreuil or the Porte de Choisy, and brought back in the car a swarm of ragged urchins who took advantage of the trip to slash the curtains and work the various knobs and levers or endlessly blow the horn. Terrified as he was, the chauffeur looked impassively on. His presence was necessary because Django had never obtained a driving licence. All he had to do was to sit in his seat and wait for his master for hours on end. On the other hand, he was paid five thousand francs a month, the equivalent of a cabinet minister’s salary at that time.

The quintet was offered two engagements in quick succession at the Marignan and the ABC. At the Marignan the quintet appeared with Beryl Davis, the young singer they had brought back from England with them, but she was greeted with hoots of derision. She sang in English and the

audience chanted 'In French, in French!' Fortunately everything went well at the ABC, where musicians and singer alike were generously acclaimed.

'No less incentive than several years' international triumphs, and, more particularly, their recent four-month tour in England, was needed to goad the timorous French music halls into action. After scoring a big – and un hoped for – success at the ABC, the quintet can find no work in Paris and is about to return to England where its popularity knows no bounds' (*Jazz Hot*, October-November 1938).

After the ABC engagement Django took advantage of the ensuing period of inactivity to go with a group of caravans, taking up gipsy life once again. The vans stopped at a camping-ground in the Allier where a thorough-going vendetta had been fought out only a few days before between different clans, several gipsies having been killed. (The incident received a fair amount of publicity at the time; all the newspapers reported it and carried photographs.) Despite his British sang-froid and strict training the chauffeur was stricken with panic at the sight of the inhabitants who crept around the car after nightfall. He begged Django to let him leave and returned to his island home by the first train the next morning.

Only a short while afterwards Django had a terrible smash with the very same car. He had decided to drive to Toulon with his wife and some friends. Overtaking a tram just as they were going out of Lyons he was forced to drive straight into the ditch to avoid a car coming in the opposite direction. Only by a miracle did he miss the trees that lined the road. Whilst a crowd was gathering round, Django, still dazed by the shock, clambered unhurt out of the wreckage. His first action was to look in the boot to see whether his guitar had sustained any damage! When the police arrived on the scene Django was unable to produce his licence (his chauffeur had taken it with him by mistake in his haste to get away) and was led back to the police station with the others, under suspicion of having stolen the car. When they asked him who he was and what was his job he asserted that he was a famous entertainer who played the guitar and was known the world over, but it was all in vain; the police had never heard of the Quintet of the Hot Club de France, nor of Django Reinhardt either! Seeing that the forces of law and order were unimpressed by his reasoning, and boggling at the idea of being locked up, Django took his guitar and began to play. Rather than a jazz classic, he took care to choose a Neapolitan love-song, which left the

police thoroughly bemused, and in the end the music smoothed everything over.



In February 1939 the quintet was invited to tour Scandinavia. They had to travel through Germany, which was then busily preparing for war. It was just after the annexation of the vital area in Czechoslovakia and just before the invasion of Austria. The German Grand Reich very nearly annexed the quintet! For its members' shady appearance and French nationality meant that they were subjected to the strictest investigation.

'I was unaware,' Stéphane admits, 'that visas were needed to pass through Germany. As soon as we'd crossed the frontier at Aachen we ran into trouble. The authorities made us get off the train to question us as to why we had no visas. We were taken into a large office which was dominated by an immense oil painting of Hitler. You only had to move a little and the reflections off the shiny surface made it look as though the Führer's moustache was quivering! Django, of course, burst out laughing. Believe me, I was hard put to it to fix things up, and even so all our money was confiscated!'

Absolutely destitute, the band had to go without food during the long journey. Hamburg station was decked out with flags and banners and swarming with armed soldiers when they got there; there were swastikas everywhere. Later it was learnt that the Führer had been due to launch a big German battleship the next day. The effect was certainly 'kolossal' and the musicians felt overwhelmed by so much splendour, but were unable to forget how hungry they were as they strolled about on the platform waiting for their connection. And while they were surveying this grandiose display and joking to try to cheer each other up they were threatened by the masses of SS who looked down their noses at these outsiders.

'The Scandinavian tour,' Grappelly declares, 'was sensational! However, I can remember Django was extremely annoyed when the garland reserved for distinguished visitors was put round my neck instead of his. But the tour went off without any setbacks until just before the final concert. We were in Stockholm. We were due to end up in Oslo. Just as the train was about to leave, our new bassist Eugene d'Hellemmes decided he wanted to buy a French newspaper. He missed the train, and, as for us, we missed the concert. The hall was packed and the organizers had to give the

audience their money back. As you might say, it was all in the best traditions of the Quintet of the Hot Club de France!’

When they returned from Scandinavia, several recording sessions were waiting for them in Paris. Soon after, the Duke Ellington Orchestra arrived, an event which coincided with the opening of the Hot Club’s new quarters in the Rue Chaptal in April. This ceremony was attended by musicians from the celebrated coloured band, not to mention absolutely everyone who was connected with jazz in France. The quintet played in the office on the first floor to a select audience which included Duke Ellington and Irving Mills. Django attached a great deal of importance to this audition for he hoped that Irving Mills, one of the biggest impresarios in the United States, would take up this group which had already conquered the whole of Europe and launch it on the other side of the Atlantic.

It was during the famous coloured band’s stay in Paris, I believe, that an interesting incident took place. ‘I chanced to run into Django in Montmartre,’ Savitry recalls. ‘He asked me to go along with him, explaining that he’d been invited to attend the opening of the Hot Feet, which was to take place that evening. If I remember right the Hot Feet was a tiny cabaret shaped like a triangle in the Rue Notre-Dame de Lorette. There was just room for a piano next to the bar. It was two o’clock in the morning when the door opened and two Negroes came in. They sat down at a table and ordered drinks. Django was playing. He hadn’t seen them enter and didn’t notice the fuss that was going on. The proprietor had recognized Duke Ellington and his bassist and was keen to make as much capital as possible out of their presence on opening night. He was all set to announce these important guests to his customers and call for applause.

‘It was just then that Django recognized the Duke. He couldn’t very well put down his guitar, but the famous band-leader smiled broadly at him. Django was as happy as a sand-boy. When he’d finished he went over to Ellington. Ellington shook hands with him and asked him to join him. Then he asked him to play again. I could see how overjoyed Django was from the way his head was bobbing from side to side. ‘Ah, my friend!’ he was saying. In the end the Duke sat down at the piano and the two of them improvised for a quarter of an hour or more.’

10

The War

In August 1939 the quintet left for England once more. A long tour had been arranged and it was hoped that it would be followed by appearances in India and Australia.

‘We piled into my 201 and off we went!’ Stéphane says. ‘When we got to Folkestone we ran into a black-out rehearsal. None of the street lights was on, we weren’t allowed to switch on the headlamps, and it was as black as pitch. It took us four hours to get to London. We were completely worn out. We opened the next day. But it was a sad atmosphere. Already they were painting the dressing-room windows dark blue.’

‘Django and Stéphane,’ recalls Emmanuel Soudieux, ‘were often at loggerheads. This made it very difficult for us. If we rode in Stéphane’s Peugeot, we were sure to be in Django’s bad books. On the other hand, if we stayed with Django we were frightened Grappelly might take offence.’

‘All the same,’ Stéphane Grappelly continues, ‘we’d finished our first two weeks on the first Saturday in September. We weren’t due to appear again until the following Monday, at the Kilburn State. On Sunday, when the first siren went, Django called up to me from the street. I opened the window.

“Coming then?” he shouted. ‘I’m off!’

“Where are you going?”

“The war’s on!”

‘I didn’t know war had been declared.

“What do you expect me to do about it? Do you think I can go off and stop it like Chamberlain?”

“If you don’t come down straightaway, I’m off without you!”

“Go on then!”

‘I thought he was pulling my leg. But when I heard the taxi move off I began to catch on. I dressed hurriedly, got my things together and took a

cab to Victoria Station. The train had just gone. I wasn't to set eyes on him again till the end of the war.

'In his haste Django had left everything behind in his room. All his cases, his belongings...even his guitar!'

'We hoped,' Soudieux goes on, 'that Django would come back once he'd calmed down, or at least that he'd let us know how he was getting on. Lew Grade, who was handling the band, asked me to go and find him and bring him back from Paris. Finally, broke as I was, I left by the last boat-train, leaving Grappelly alone in London.'



In Paris, once the first wave of surprise was over and the fluster of mobilization had died down, night life picked up again, soon becoming more brilliant than ever. The soldiers who were on leave were out for amusement no less than those who had found themselves a cosy billet away from the front and were doing fine.

During the first winter of the war, the proprietor of Jimmy's, deserted by the coloured musicians he had previously employed at his club in Montparnasse, approached Django Reinhardt. Django had a great affection for Charlie Lewis, one of the few Negroes who had stayed in Paris. 'Lewis certainly drank more than was good for him at the time,' says Alix Combelle, 'but all the same he was an excellent pianist, especially when it came to accompanying. Django had got together Philippe Brun, Alex Renard and me: all three of us were exempt from service. We didn't have a drummer, but Pierre Ferret played guitar and Emmanuel Soudieux bass.'

I recorded this group whilst I was on leave in February 1940, together with other groups in which Andre Ekyan and Alix Combelle played. Ekyan was then leading a small band at the Kit Cat on the Champs-Elysees, but when Renard, Philippe Brun and Ekyan were called up, Ekyan offered Combelle his job at the Kit Cat. Combelle told Django he knew of just the person he was looking for to replace him, a tenorist who was playing at Mimi Pinson's. He was just great, Combelle said. This was Hubert Rostaing.

'When I got back from North Africa in 1940,' Rostaing says, 'I auditioned for the Mimi Pinson band. Next door there was a little club where Andre Ekyan was playing. At that time I was just another tenor saxophone player who doubled on concertina. But I liked jazz and so I'd often listen to Ekyan. One day 'Camembert' (Pierre Ferret) approached me

on Django Reinhardt's behalf, telling me that Django wanted me to work for him. He said I must go and see him. Go and see Django, that was something special! I found out that Combelle was taking Ekylan's place at the Kit Cat and Django wanted me to replace Alix at Jimmy's. So off I went there. I was delighted to meet someone like Django! He was in evening dress, with a cap on his head, and kept saying to all and sundry: 'I'm off to America tomorrow!' When he saw me he said: 'Sit down, my son, we'll have a drink.'

'I had one, two, three...and still Django didn't say anything. By the time I'd got to my sixth, I was a bit under the weather. It was then Django exclaimed without further ado: 'Good, you'll come tomorrow then.'

'And not a word had he said about hours or conditions! At that time, it's true, I'd have worked for nothing. Just think, to play with Django! When I got to Jimmy's I was in bad shape. My tone was very poor. Besides, I was still a beginner. Just imagine: I didn't even know what a blues was!

"Go to it!" Django cried, to put some heart into me.

'Since I wasn't making out so well with my tenor I picked up my clarinet. Django stopped playing.

"You want to stay with that instrument," he said.

'And that's how I settled for the clarinet. Often when we chatted together he'd talk of forming a new quintet. But the invader's approach was soon to separate us. I left to fulfil an engagement at Biarritz shortly before the exodus.'

Then came the suddenly unexpected collapse. Panic-stricken, Django and his wife fled from the enemy armies, part of the tide of humanity which swept back towards the south in the hope that a miracle would save France from defeat; but the miracle never happened and after the armistice had been signed came the dreary return towards Paris, unscarred but soulless, a capital where freedom was whittled down a little more as each day passed.

Bit by bit, though, the Parisians drifted back to their old ways. One felt the need to relax, to get away from it all. The Boche, moreover, had not yet shown their true hands. Surely this was not the terror we had feared? The younger set, particularly, happy-go-lucky as ever, were out to find ways of enjoying themselves. You had to make arrangements, to meet at home, for instance; no longer was it a question of visiting the clubs, for they had been requisitioned by the Wehrmacht. This thirst for amusement was to have unexpected results. Deprived of American films – these were now

forbidden – the public, which until then had evinced precious little interest in jazz, suddenly showed enormous enthusiasm for it. Overnight, almost, jazz records began to sell in their thousands; the public craved for ‘swing’, whether in the illegal dance-halls that had sprung up everywhere or in the music halls.

‘Swing!’ This magic word became the watchword for young people everywhere. Swing was on everyone’s lips, you swore by it. Everything that was at all original or redolent of American life was baptized ‘swing’.



Up to that time the man in the street had been completely unaware of the musicians’ efforts, if he had not been positively indifferent to them. Never had we dreamed that one day jazz would command a wide audience. When Django and his quintet appeared at the Normandie for the first time we were astounded to find it scoring a tremendous success! Jazz – until then the province of a small minority of enthusiasts – was stirring up interest and excitement amongst the public at large. It was an event without precedent. Since there were no foreign performers on hand, the best-known French musicians, such as Combelle, Ekyan, Viseur and Barelli, became popular stars overnight. Django Reinhardt, already famous, saw his name staring down at him in giant capitals from the walls. In less than no time he became one of the most successful stars of the stage. Photographs of him were on sale everywhere and countless columns and articles were devoted to his music and his career.

Our friend, Pierre Fouad, who was to distinguish himself later as the drummer with the group, remembers the period very well, and can recall the new quintet being formed. ‘I’d just got back to Paris,’ he said, ‘when I ran into Django in the Rue Fontaine. He began to talk about a new number he’d just written – this was *Nuages* – and then went on to chat about the quintet.

“Look here, Fouad, my friend,’ he said. ‘I’m not going to go and pack up playing just because Grappelly’s not around any more! I’ve got to get a new quintet together. Before the Germans came I heard a young saxophonist who also plays the clarinet pretty well. It’s hard to find a replacement for Stéphane. We used to play arrangements that would be too difficult for a clarinettist. But this kiddy’s got a nice soft sound. He’s got plenty of drive, he doesn’t mind working. He doesn’t worry about playing *Appel Indirect* or stuff like that. I’ve a good mind to take him on. What do you think, Fouad?’

“You could have a pianist too.’

“Oh, I don’t know, I’ve never been too keen on pianists, they’re not much use, they drag the rhythm section down. Well...maybe...two guitars? I’ve had enough of that, two guitars, it sounds so mechanical.’

“All you’ve got to do is to form a quintet with the clarinettist, a bassist, a drummer, just one guitar and no piano. That would be just as good.’

“As far as the beat’s concerned, you’re right. But a piano gives a soloist such good support! It’s good to hear: at least I’d have something to listen to!’

‘And he seemed to be saying: with these two guitarists of mine, it’s tinny, it’s thin harmonically. In the end I persuaded him to do without a pianist.’

As soon as Hubert Rostaing returned, the new quintet immediately began rehearsing in the Hot Club cellar and on October 1, 1940, Django recorded his new composition *Nuages* and one or two other tunes he had written especially for the new group. Hubert Rostaing, however, had a lot of trouble fitting in with the new quintet. He shut himself away in his room and practised furiously. He put everything he had into it; but faced with the technical difficulties presented by his new role, he began to lose heart and had it not been for Django would certainly have given it all up. On October 4 the quintet opened at the Normandie cinema.

‘We also had a singer,’ recalls Pierre Fouad, ‘Josette Dayde. But after a couple of weeks, Django had had enough of her. She could never come in on the right beat and was always losing the rhythm and we kept having to put her right. For the engagement at the Olympia in Bordeaux, which followed the job at the Normandie, Nila Cara took over from Josette.’

During the journey Django killed time playing cards with Frehel and Fred Adison, the organizer of the show. Frehel was very good and as usual Django lost; he lost so heavily, in fact, that by the time they reached Bordeaux he had already gambled away his week’s fee for playing the town.

This brings us up to December 1940. Django was not very happy about his first recording of *Nuages*, and when the quintet returned to the studios for another session he called Alix Combelle as well. In this connection Combelle recalls an original idea which emerged.

‘With a single clarinet,’ he declares, ‘Django couldn’t get the effect he was after: it was a typical quintet sound. Now with two clarinets he had the

makings of an orchestra at his disposal and even succeeded in giving the impression of a much larger group. In *Oiseau des lies*, Django hit on a wonderful device. I remember that in the release we played a series of chords, which is normal enough. But what was so extraordinary was that we didn't play two of the main notes of the chord. He had us play only the two least important notes. And the most curious thing of all was that though we didn't play the two main notes I've spoken of, you could hear them all the same, by force of association as it were! Only Django would have thought of it!

All the music halls that had ignored the quintet for so long now began to vie with each other for its services. After the Normandie there was the Week of Screen, Record and Radio Stars (Salle Pleyel, from December 24, 1940, to January 1, 1941); the Avenue (March 1941); the Folies Belleville, and the Normandie once more (September 1-14, 1941); the Olympia (September 15-30); the Moulin Rouge (October 1-14); the ABC (beginning on October 31); and then the Alhambra. At one and the same time the group was appearing at the smartest night-clubs in Paris: Ciro's (December 1940); Jane Stick (January 1941); Le Montecristo (February 1941); and, from spring onwards, L'Imperatrice (Le Doyen) in the afternoons and Jane Stick in the evenings.

Active once again, the Hot Club organized a Festival of French Jazz in the Salle Gaveau on December 19, 1940, at which the quintet inevitably received top billing. All the seats were sold in the space of twenty-four hours and a second concert had to be arranged at once. The same was the case with the first recital the quintet gave in the Salle Pleyel on February 2, which was to be followed by half a dozen others!

For the first time Django was to conduct a large orchestra. This, we knew full well, was one of his dreams come true; for in point of fact he was only mildly interested in the quintet. After the first part of the programme, which featured the quintet, the musicians of the orchestra took up their places.

Then came the warning three knocks and up went the curtain. At that precise moment, however, Django, who had never before led an orchestra in public – and with a baton, if you please – was seized with stage fright and refused to go on. In the end we had to push him on, and if I remember right he made his appearance walking backwards! And all this trouble despite his

magnificent white dinner jacket, splendidly complemented by his shoes with their yellow buttons.

‘For their first engagement at Jane Stick in January 1941,’ recalls Mme Boyer-Davis, ‘not one of them had a pass, and we used to have to shuffle home in the snow, hiding in the doorways at the least sound of boots on the flagstones. One night, though, we ended up in the Saint-Philippe du Roule police station. Since the constables wouldn’t believe we worked in a club because we had no passes, Django, Gus Viseur and the rest of the musicians started to play; but it didn’t end with a mere demonstration. They went on till the crack of dawn, encouraged by the police, who marked the beat by clapping their hands. By the time we left we were all as thick as thieves. And, better still, our new friends had told us how to go about getting official passes.’

‘When we opened at Jane Stick,’ Pierre Fouad declares, ‘the place was as quiet as the grave. That club had always been a dead loss. But in a few days we were packing it out! The customers had come to listen to the quintet; there was no floorshow, or any other kind of entertainment. Absolutely everyone came along. Rubirosa and his crowd, Danielle Darrieux, Roland Toutain, Jimmy Gaillard and many more besides were to be seen there every night. The atmosphere was first rate. We enjoyed ourselves and the music was fine. When the patrol had gone past, the tables would be pushed back and the dancing would start. As soon as the alarm was given the tables were set back in place and everything became very orderly again as though by magic.

‘Now and again Roland Toutain and Jimmy Gaillard organized a ‘reflex’. This was a game which consisted of dodging plates when they were thrown at you; and since Roland sometimes took up his position in front of the band, each time he dodged one we’d just have time to duck. One night when Roland literally threw himself backwards towards the band, I managed to get my bass drum out of the way just in the nick of time and he ended up by crashing head-on into the piano!

‘This amused Django no end. In fact, I think this must have been one of the happiest periods of his life. He was pleased with his sidemen when they played well and he took a great delight in playing himself. Sometimes we’d have to stop him. And he was always there on time. Obviously it couldn’t last. But this time, at any rate, it went on for several months!

‘In the spring, Django was asked to double at Le Doyen for the tea-dances there. ‘We’re going to make some money out of this, my friend!’ he said. What Django liked about Le Doyen was the surroundings. Whilst we were playing we could look out of the great bay windows and see the trees along the Champs Elysees. Django found inspiration in the view, and this is how he came to compose *Lentement, Mademoiselle* one afternoon.

‘Let me start,’ he told us, ‘you come in playing very softly and when you’ve got the tune, Hubert (he was talking to Ros-taing), you join in too.’

‘We took little or no notice of the clientele, made up for the most part of old dowagers who could hardly have found our music interesting. You had to understand Django. When he was pleased with the band, he was serious. He made a list of the tunes he wanted to play and passed it to Rostaing. This list was really only a basis, because when everything was going well, Django no longer took any notice of it. He gave us the beat and you had to guess by the way he tapped his foot what tune it was he had in mind! What we really needed was second sight, for the least hesitation on our part annoyed him. If he seemed pleased, we were supposed to know what tune it was that he wanted to play!

‘And when he wanted to play there was no stopping him. I can remember that when we appeared at the Folies Belleville – we were still at Jane Stick – Django, who felt really on top of his form, played, as though he were working in the club, a *St Louis Blues* that lasted a good three-quarters of an hour. A whole lot of people left their seats and started to put their overcoats on. The manager came storming on to the stage to stop us.

‘As you know, Django was already famous. Now one afternoon someone came in to the Le Doyen and asked the *maître d’hdtel* to point, out Django Reinhardt to him.

‘See what he’s after,’ Django said to me.

‘I want to speak to the so-called Django Reinhardt,’ the stranger told me.

‘Why do you say ‘so-called?’

‘Don’t try and kid me. I’ve just got back from a prisoner-of-war camp where I spent six months with Django Reinhardt. Django Reinhardt’s advertised as playing here and I’ve come along to see him. Don’t take me for an imbecile!’

‘Without a shadow of a doubt this must have been one of his countless ‘cousins’ who had falsified his identity so as to stand a better chance of

being released!

‘In the evening,’ Fouad goes on, ‘we’d often dine in a little restaurant in the Rue Troyon near the Etoile. We used to sit in the garden, and the food wasn’t bad as food went in those days. Sometimes Django would hum and one evening in particular he said to me, ‘Listen, my friend, I’m going to sing like Armstrong!’ And he came out with some scat, ‘Ah-di-ba, de-ba...’ That’s how he put *Swing 42* together. We played it at the club that very evening so as to fix it in our minds.

‘We played for six months or more at Jane Stick. I’ve already mentioned how pleasant and how punctual Django was. But even when things are going well, there’s always a fly in the ointment. In this case it was a gipsy wedding Django had invited us to. We had a fair old time. We played and when the time came to leave for work at Jane Stick I said to Django: ‘Look, Django, your mates are some of the best, but it’s time to leave if we don’t want to get to the club late!’

“So what. Let the three of them clear off, they’ll do all right. We’ll stay, my son, and play together, the pair of us.’

“Now look, Django, you’re not facing facts.’

‘I had my living to make; and what good were the three of them by themselves? Django wouldn’t leave his gipsies, so I cleared off with Rostaing. Django didn’t have the face to come back to Jane Stick and we finished the engagement there with Leo Chauliac.

‘I must say that I’d already squabbled with Django. He hadn’t given his sidemen a rise for some time. Now we knew the quintet was making a lot of money. So the musicians weren’t very happy, but nobody dared say anything. One day the rest of them asked me to speak to Jules Borkon, the band’s manager, about it; but when he asked the others if what I’d said was true, all the fight went out of them and they said no, they didn’t have anything to complain about. You can imagine that Django had it in for me for some time after that.’

‘Django was perfectly well aware of being a star,’ Rostaing goes on. ‘But he had no head for business. He always came the high horse with Borkon and demanded preposterous sums of money. And he wouldn’t budge an inch. When Borkon asked him how much he wanted for some job or other, he’d reply: ‘How much does Cary Grant or Tyrone Power get? I want the same as them!’

‘As he saw it, there was no difference. Simple as it was, his reasoning was logical in his own eyes. Django was a big star right enough, and he was out to do as well as he could for himself. But it took several days’ bargaining to make him see sense. Mind you, at other times he was quite happy to play for nothing.’

‘One day when we were set to do a recording session for Swing,’ recalls Pierre Fouad, ‘you’d told me the sidemen usually got four hundred francs.

≡ Fouad is referring to the author.

I tackled Django about this when I saw him.

‘I see we’re recording this afternoon. What are we going to make?’

‘Three hundred and fifty.’

‘That’s not very generous of you. The others get four hundred.’

‘That’s how it goes.’

‘How about a game of billiards this evening after the date?’ he went on.

‘All right,’ I said. ‘What’ll you give me?’

‘Oh, fifteen points, just the same as usual. Fifteen to twenty, or so.’

‘Now I knew he couldn’t afford to give me more than thirteen or fourteen. But vain as ever, he was set on giving me sixteen or seventeen, and that was it. He lost a packet, I’m telling you! As you can imagine, I didn’t worry about the fifty francs difference with the records. The same evening I took three hundred thousand francs off him. And Django was always getting his figures wrong. Sometimes he’d give me a hundred francs too much and Hubert a hundred francs too little, which meant I was better paid than Rostaing.

‘All the same he bore us a grudge about our letting him down at that gipsy wedding. Now a few days later Rubirosa was due to give a party in the Rue Julien-Potin at Neuilly. He’d engaged Django and the Jane Stick band. Obviously he’d not heard about our quarrel. Django had got together a makeshift quintet with his brother Joseph, Eddie Barclay and another two musicians. Just imagine the look on his face when Rostaing, Soudieux, Eugene Vees and I walked in, just after they’d finished playing! Django took Ruby aside. ‘What did you want to ask Fouad along for?’ he said. ‘We’re at loggerheads, I’m not going to play with him!’ And he went and mingled with the guests.

‘Once we started we found we were on top form, and I don’t think we’d ever played better in our whole lives! Django must have realized it, too, for after a few minutes, unable to contain himself any longer, he rose, picked

up his guitar and joined us. And we went on playing together without a break till ten o'clock the next morning! All the guests had gone when we stopped, but Rubirosa was still listening attentively and asked us to go on playing just for him. We didn't need to be pressed. I believe the next number lasted over an hour! When we left Django was as pleased as punch. He'd never carry his own guitar generally, but he had my bass drum in one hand and my tom-tom on top of his head and carried them as far as the Pont de Neuilly where we took the métro. 'You can't go on squabbling all your life,' he said on the way there. 'We'll have to get the quintet together again.' But apart from a few shows and one or two concerts at the Salle Pleyel, the quintet we'd had at Jane Stick was soon to break up once and for all.

'When we appeared at the Olympia, there weren't many people at the afternoon shows; just one or two loungers who'd come to see the film and who were bored more often than not by the stage acts – especially by a band like ours. One day Django noticed someone sitting in the front row of the stalls apparently reading his newspaper. Django couldn't help staring at him, because he'd noticed that he was watching us through two holes that he'd burnt in the paper. Puffs of smoke came out of them now and again. Django leant over towards me.

"There you are,' he said sarcastically, 'that's France all over for you. Every man jack a musician.'

'But Django had already noticed a violinist in the pit band, a little old fellow with a beard, a typical conservatory type, who seemed to be interested in what we were doing. Perhaps he didn't understand, but at least he was trying to follow what Django was playing. So Django, no longer concerned in the least about the public, was playing for him.

"He's got some feelings inside him, my son,' he told me. 'He ought to be able to play better than the rest, but maybe he can't.'

'And instead of following the programme – which we'd had to submit to the censor beforehand and which we ought to have kept to – Django had us in his dressing-room between each set rehearsing new numbers he'd composed especially for the little bearded violinist. And he'd rub his hands together in glee at the mere thought of regaling this attentive listener with them, who lapped up everything we played and who was amazed to hear us featuring a different programme every time. I'm pretty sure we got through about fifty different tunes over the fortnight.

‘After the Olympia, the quintet went straight on to play at the Moulin Rouge, which was one of the chain of cinemas controlled by a German company. It’s there the famous knife-throwing games took place that lasted all afternoon. We were bored stiff between each show and since we didn’t have time to go back home, we used to go and play billiards, amusing ourselves as best we could.’

‘One night when we’d gone off to the café round the corner for a game of billiards,’ Naguine says, ‘Django asked me what time it was. I told him we still had half an hour. Though I didn’t know it, my watch had stopped! A few seconds later the stage manager came rushing in to tell us we were on in one minute’s time! We still had to get changed. With the help of the attendants we threw on our band jackets backstage; but I’ve forgotten to tell you that there were three bands in the show and they each had their own area on-stage lit up in turn. The show had begun and there was no way of getting on to the stage. Ekyan’s band had already finished playing and Gus Viseur’s was well on with its programme. They had to cut a hole in the canvas at the back, and we tumbled into our places just as the curtain went up and the spotlight picked us out.’

‘Apropos the knives,’ Fouad goes on, ‘this is how we spent our brief leisure moments. We’d drawn a large target on our dressing-room door and whilst one of us listened closely to hear if anyone was coming, we’d all take turns throwing the knife at the target. You had to throw it pretty hard to make sure it stuck in the wood. After a fortnight there were any number of holes, and in time they grew into cracks between anything from four inches to a foot long. In the end you could see right through the door: it was lucky the job finished when it did, for when we left the door had just about seen its day. I’d imagine that if the manager went to open it after we’d gone it most likely came away in his hands.’



As we have seen, Django Reinhardt had worked almost throughout the whole year. Never before had a jazz group known such success in Paris. At that time Django lived in a luxury flat on the Champs-Élysées. His name was to be seen on the walls of the capital at every turn and photographs of him were on sale even in the chain stores. Any number of far-fetched anecdotes appeared in the press about this new star. Success had made Django more capricious than ever. After a year, though, the country began to chafe beneath the occupation and people lost their enthusiasm. Paris no

longer offered the quintet enough scope, and it began to undertake tours in the provinces and in neighbouring countries.

In the autumn, Django, now bereft of his quintet, formed a big band for a new cabaret, the Paris-Plage, which was opening near the Place Clichy. In the early months of 1942 he partly got his quintet together again for an engagement at Le Nid, doubling at the Alhambra.

Eugene Vees recalls that it was there Django settled down comfortably at a table one evening to eat a hedgehog he'd brought him, a dish highly esteemed by gipsies. Some customers sitting at a nearby table were rather perturbed at the sight. 'What's that you're eating?' they inquired. 'It looks very much like a rat'.

'Oh yes, it's a rat all right,' Django replied. 'And it's very good, too.'

April saw the quintet in Belgium. The three concerts originally scheduled in Brussels were followed by five other shows and in due course the group appeared in many other towns up and down the country. Hubert Rostaing remembers the tour very well. 'The success of Django and the quintet,' he recalls, 'surpassed all our expectations. We had a wonderful welcome in Belgium from public and musicians alike, and Django and I were asked to do some recording. The trip itself was none too comfortable since there were so few trains running, and they were all packed. We could never find poor Andre Jourdan whenever we were leaving. He was always off playing the one-armed bandits, the rogue, whenever we should have been catching the train. We used to get in a cold sweat time and again thanks to him. As for Django, he made a mint. He came back with gold watches on each wrist. His wife had bracelets all over her arms, round her ankles, anywhere there was room for them. Anything that remained he gambled away.

'When the Belgium tour was over, we moved on to Lille. The quintet played in a large cinema every day and also appeared at Chez Freddy. Freddy Beaufort was a comedian whose well-worn repertoire was a little reminiscent of Delmet's. Django was accompanying him and he sent him into fits. His songs were so simple and his patter so amusing that Django couldn't help bursting into laughter. It was absolutely scandalous! Django would be laughing before the act had even begun; and the audience didn't know whether to listen to the comedian or be amused at the sight of Django splitting his sides.

‘It was at Lille that Django dragged us all off to a gipsy encampment after one show. We were dog-tired and still had our white dinner-jackets on. It also entered his head to take us along to church to hear the organist at morning mass.

‘In September we were getting ready for a new tour that was to take us down to the Côte d’Azur and then over to North Africa. In Lyon we played at Les Ambassadeurs before moving on to Nice and the Riviera. While we were appearing at the Palais de la Méditerranée in Nice, Django turned up one night beaming all over his face to announce that he’d just won 345,000 francs. At the time this was real money. What he didn’t tell us was that he went back to the Casino the next day and left 565,000 francs there. During this engagement a guitar support arrived that Django had ordered from Selmer’s. He had always been put out by having to play sitting down whilst the quintet’s other soloist was well in view; but after a couple of evenings this new toy was left in a corner and Django was back in his chair.

‘We also played other towns in the Midi but, I have to say it, as soon as Django was in funds he became unbearable. He found it stifling to have to work for the public. I can’t remember too well, but it was either at Beziers or Montpellier that the audience pushed their way backstage to protest at our not having stayed on long enough when it would have been so easy for him to have satisfied all his admirers by playing an encore. Django had refused to do so, as though he were in a rush to get away from the theatre. More than once he annoyed the public this way. At this period he dressed with great elegance; the perfect aristocrat, he was always being asked out by the most attractive women.

‘By the time we set sail for Algiers we’d had just about enough of him. There was no doubt about it, Django had too much money. The sea was rough and when the quintet came to play for the crew’s benefit during the trip he was seasick. When we arrived, Aletti, the manager of the theatre, showed Django the contract. It was laid down that he was to give *matinee* performances as well as play in the evening. Django refused to do *matinees*. When it came to it, he just wasn’t interested. He had no desire to work. And he went back to France and left us in Algiers. I remember we eventually took the last boat; the day after, the Allies landed in North Africa.

‘We linked up with Django again on the Riviera but the place was crowded out with Italian troops and all the clubs were closed. After a few days we were flat broke. The Only thing we could do was to get back to

Paris. With our last few francs we booked third-class seats and sat in our compartment munching away at sandwiches. And who did we see go by in the corridor but Django. He didn't even bother to say hello. He'd managed to borrow ten thousand francs from our bass player Jean Storne and stalked by with his nose in the air, bound for his first-class seat!'

Once back in Paris, Django took a flat in the Rue des Acacias near the Salle Pleyel, where he was soon to give yet another concert. On the misguided advice of his impresario, who, like him, was out to make as much money as possible, Django refused to give Hubert Rostaing the rise he had asked for. Andre Lluís replaced Hubert at the last moment. The worst might have been expected, but, unlike the way he had played during the tour, Django excelled himself and turned in a great performance, earning a tremendous ovation. Andre Lluís played a great many notes, but failed to make us forget Rostaing, whose style had been so well suited to the quintet. The rhythm section, strengthened at the fifty-ninth minute by the addition of Ninine Vees, played with commendable spirit. Jourdan's interventions were always beautifully timed and in perfect taste.

Let us have recourse now to clarinetist Gerard Leveque's memory. 'I'd come to Paris with a Valenciennes band,' he declares, 'to take part in the annual amateur band contest. André Jourdan, who knew Django was looking for a new clarinet player, had me come along to a dressing-room in the Theatre de l'Etoile. I underwent a kind of audition with Storne, Ninine and Jourdan, who were backing the singer Sylviane Dorame at this theatre. Django was just outside the door. He came in and we talked things over before coming to an agreement. Three days later I moved to the Rue des Acacias where Django had rented a small flat. He had employed me to write down the music of the orchestrations he had in mind.

'Every night we used to go off to the cinema or the music hall and once we got back Django would lie down and spend the rest of the night playing. We'd stop to eat and drink but that was all. He'd play each instrument's part on his guitar and I'd get it down on paper. That's how we did the scores for *Belleville* and *Oubli*, which Django recorded soon after with Fud Candrix's band. More important, it was there we began to get down the famous symphony *Manoir de Mes Reves*.'

Already advertised, Django's symphony was finished a few days before the concert, after one or two sleepless nights. However, Jo Bouillon, who was to conduct the orchestra accompanying his brother Gabriel, recoiled in

horror at the sight of the score, disconcerted by its modern character, its daring harmonic approach.

‘Besides,’ Gerard Leveque continues, ‘the parts for the choir weren’t finished in time. Jean Cocteau was to have written the words, but nobody had sent him the synopsis. Django had very particular ideas about musical notation, and, what is more, I was far from possessing the knowledge required to carry out a job as hard as the one he had in mind. So the symphony wasn’t performed and the score Django had given to the conductor at the ABC, a certain M. Tildy, was misplaced and never found. This was a great pity, for there were some sensational things in it.’

It should not be imagined that this was Django’s first attempt. In the course of the same winter Robert Bergman had played a few of his symphonic fragments, notably his *Bolero*, which was on the same programme as Maurice Ravel’s celebrated work of the same name and which revealed Django Reinhardt’s talent as a composer.

‘I’d only just come to Paris,’ Gerard Leveque goes on, turning to a different subject. ‘With my middle-class background, I suppose it was natural I’d be somewhat shocked by the way Django went on. For instance, whenever a food parcel arrived for me from my mother and I was out, I was sure to find the packet opened when I got back and its contents spilled all over the table. One of them would take the packet of cigarettes, the other dib into the jar of jam: only the pair of socks would be left untouched at the bottom of the packet. Please don’t misunderstand me about this. For me, of course, it was a question of childish sentimentality. It was altogether natural for them to behave as they did. Moreover, I had nothing to grumble about. Everything they had was mine too and Django was always treating me.

‘Despite the restrictions he never went short. He had plenty of cash and went out every night before getting down to work. Sometimes, of course, he’d get embroiled in a game of poker or billiards, and wouldn’t come back.

‘In March, Fud Candrix’s band came to Paris and Django took advantage of the event to record some of the scores we’d prepared together. Used as he was to playing with the quintet, a group that was compact enough but fairly limited from the musical viewpoint, he took great delight in hearing a big band with brass and saxophone sections, and violins into the bargain at times. It not only gave him an incentive to play but suggested countless ideas to him for orchestrations. He came upon fresh possibilities,

all kinds of combinations of sounds, voicings that were out of the question where the quintet was concerned.

‘Soon after Candrix came through, we were booked for a new series of concerts in Brussels. Fud Candrix’s band was to be featured during the first half and the quintet during the second. During the second concert Candrix noticed that Django wasn’t in his dressing-room during the interval. He asked me to go and see if Django was at his hotel and off I went. I knocked at the door of his room several times, but since I got no reply imagined that he’d arrived at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in the meantime, and set off back there myself. Since nobody had come, Candrix had started the second half of the concert and was stretching it out as much as he could. Back I went to the hotel once more, and when I knocked on his door Django replied. He’d just woken up. I gave him a piece of my mind. Once in the street we stopped a motorcyclist who kindly agreed to take Django on his pillion, thanks to which he was able to get to the concert just before it ended. As for me, it didn’t really matter, since Andre Lluís was the featured clarinetist with the quintet at that time.’

In July 1945 Django’s official marriage took place. Apart from one or two brief escapades he had been living under the same roof with Sophie Ziegler, alias Naguine, alias La Guigne, for fifteen years or so. The idea of a legal ceremony had been put forward by his wife who was more and more concerned that Django might leave her for good; it also appealed to his impresario, who sought in this way to strengthen his influence over the wayward star. With his manager’s family as the witnesses, the ceremony took place at Salbris, Loir-et-Cher, in the summer.

Immediately afterwards, Django appeared with his quintet at the Medrano circus. Enthralled as he was by any act that was out of the ordinary, and egged on by one of his musicians, who was something of a wag, he decided to have himself lowered from the ceiling on a luminous star. ‘It’ll be real American stuff,’ he said with pride. However, when it came to the final rehearsals a musician jokingly remarked that the rope looked none too strong, and Django was seized with fear. In the end he preferred to make his entrance somewhat less spectacularly on a little truck which ran on rails!

As the summer wore on, Paris began to get its share of bombs. Django took up his abode not far from the Pigalle métro, reputed to be the deepest shelter in the capital, and was always diving down there, often without

waiting for the sirens to go. It was virtually his real home. Furthermore, the Nazis were more and more insistent that the quintet should undertake the German tour it had so far managed to avoid. Django, therefore, made up his mind to retire to the peaceful surroundings of Lac Lemman, at Thonon-les-Bains, whence he hoped to make his way into Switzerland. Hardly had he arrived when he came across a tribe of gipsies and admirers who suggested he should play with his quintet. A restaurant was quickly fitted up as a club, and Django, having notified Leveque and Jourdan, his regular drummer, opened there without delay. The place soon became the rendezvous of the local upper set. German officers and Resistance fighters alike rubbed shoulders in an atmosphere of cold neutrality.

After spending a month in such equivocal surroundings, Django decided to cross the frontier. With his wife he left Thonon by night, but some German troops were sitting at a table in the café where he had arranged to meet his guide. They arrested him on suspicion and took him back to the guard-house. When he was searched he was found to be carrying the membership card of a British song-writing society. This was more than enough for him to be accused of spying. Brought back to Thonon in the morning, he was marched through the town with his wife at his side, escorted by armed soldiers. The townsfolk felt sorry for him when they saw him, thinking he must have been a member of the Resistance. Clapped into gaol, he thought his last hour had come, but he made no allowance for the miracle that was to be wrought, in this case by the German commandant. The latter was one of those jazz enthusiasts one is liable to come across anywhere in the world, a record collector in time of peace. 'My good Reinhardt,' he exclaimed when he arrived to question him, 'whatever are you doing in this fix?' After giving his explanations and promising he would make no more efforts to escape, Django was set free.

However, when the French saw him at liberty once again, they suspected him of being a collaborator! And Django, his mind made up once and for all, made a fresh attempt the following Monday. This time he set off alone, it having been agreed that his wife would join him later. After crossing no-man's-land and making his way through the barbed wire, he was surprised by the Swiss customs men. There was no way of getting around the regulations: Django was neither a Negro nor a Jew, and could not be admitted. After he had been given a meal, he was led back towards the frontier with as much precaution as possible. Unable to find the gap

through which he had made his way in the first place, he was obliged to clamber over the three yards of barbed wire that separated the two countries. It was pitch dark and the rain was teeming down. Covered with scratches and caked with mud from head to toe he at last reached the house of a French peasant, who took him in, set him on his feet again and enabled him to return to Paris without further incident.

11

1944: The Last Days of the War

Once back in the Place Pigalle, Django set about re-forming his quintet for an impending tour in the south. Let us turn to Gerard Levdque once more for a description of the trip.

‘We got to the Gare de Lyon ten minutes before the train was due to leave,’ he recalls. ‘As you’ll remember, the carriages were always packed out about that time. And not only did we have all our luggage with us, but our instruments too. You can imagine the trouble we had, once the train had started, finding our compartment. Needless to say our seats had already been taken by other travellers who were delighted by the unexpected slice of luck. It was a fine welcome we had, I can tell you! Django was wearing his hat and couldn’t think where to put it. So he went over to the window and threw it out. Seeing this, ‘Gargon’, the other guitarist who was with us, thought he should do as much, and threw his out too. Once they’d closed the window the two of them sat down quietly without exchanging a single word. When I think of the expressions on the faces of the people in the corridor! They looked absolutely horrified!’

‘It had been arranged that the quintet should appear at the Knickerbocker in Monte Carlo for a week. On the very first night Django stopped playing because someone in the audience had made a lot of noise. He put down his guitar and let the rest of the group finish the set. We learnt later that he’d gone off to a poker game at the Hotel de Paris with Geo Dorlys and Fred Ermelin and that he’d lost heavily.

‘After Monte Carlo we had to go through Toulon while it was being bombed. Django leapt through the window and disappeared until the all-clear sounded. We went on to play at Bordeaux, Biarritz, Mont-de-Marsan, Bayonne, Niort, Saintes. It was in one of the last two towns that Django refused to play because he was out of clean shirts. Since we were doing a series of one-night stands we could never get any laundry done. One of the

organizers had to knock up a store to get a white shirt and paid for it with his own clothing coupons. Yet even when he had the white shirt Django didn't really want to play and we had all the trouble imaginable persuading him to appear.

'We wended our way back north, playing in turn in Poitiers, Angers, Cambrai, Lille, Bethune, Saint-Omer, Somain, Bruay-en-Artois, Roubaix, Douai, Valenciennes and Lens. At the municipal theatre in this last town, Django was at loggerheads with the rest of the group; doubtless it was some argument or other with the rhythm section! Anyway he refused point-blank to sign any autograph books at the end of the show, although a swarm of admirers were waiting on the spiral staircase for him to come out of his dressing-room. However, a German soldier managed to push his way through, thanks to his uniform. He was an enthusiast who knew most of Django's records, which helped no end to calm Django down. But the crowd outside, looking through the window but hearing nothing of what was being said, began to lose its patience and started to make a dreadful din. In the end the stage manager had to call the police to clear the approaches to the theatre.

'Next came Rouen and Chartres, where the all-clear was sounding just as the train drew into the station. Great was the surprise of the other travellers when they saw Django and his band dive into the shelters just before a new wave of bombers dropped their cargoes on the station! After the tour was over Django decided to settle down in Paris again and opened at the Bœuf sur le Toit with a ten-piece band. When ten o'clock struck on the first night the band was still waiting for its leader. Moïsts, the manager, was tearing out his hair, and swearing he'd dismiss Django now even if he turned up after all. Hardly had the words left his mouth than a whole tribe of gipsies came swarming into the place, followed shortly afterwards by the culprit himself.

'Lulu de Montmartre had just redecorated a little club she owned in the Rue Pigalle and suggested to Django that he should take it on as his very own cabaret. Django had always longed to be his own impresario, the boss of his own club, and he was fascinated by the idea. He opened at the Roulotte in the spring and it was given the new title of Chez Django Reinhardt for the occasion. The trouble was that by the time the complete band was inside it was found to take up nearly half the available space and there was hardly any room for the customers. It was a strange atmosphere at

the Roulotte. After curfew the doors were shut and drinking went on into the early hours of the morning. As in Thonon, the most unlikely people rubbed shoulders there: you'd hear as much English as German spoken. 'That's Commandant K of the Gestapo,' you'd hear someone whisper. 'And they're British agents at the table over there on the left.' In turn the band was asked to play *God Save The King* or *Be'bert* or *Lili Marlene*, the favourite tune of the German officers.'

It was during the spring of 1944 that Django's second son was born.↓

≡ Django already had a son by his first wife. He, too, became a guitarist in due course under the name of Henri Baumgartner.

He had taken up residence in a charming little house in the Avenue Frochot, a typical suburban retreat, just round the corner from the Place Pigalle, whose deep shelter was extremely handy whenever the sirens went. Very aware of his new duties as head of the family, Django had decided to lead the uneventful life of a middle-class businessman and was beginning to organize his new home on a rational basis. Yet he couldn't restrain himself from leaving his door ajar for the gipsies, who very soon transformed the place into a veritable camping ground. Like the three wise men, these innumerable 'cousins' came to admire the heir of their god. But in what conditions!

Mme Davis-Boyer, who was a neighbour of the Reinhardt in the Avenue Frochot, remembers a visit she paid the young woman soon after the baby was born. 'La Guigne had not the slightest idea of how children should be brought up,' she says. 'The first time I went to see the baby I recoiled in fear when I opened the door, thinking the place was on fire. There was so much smoke inside that you couldn't see a thing. When I got near the bed I saw that Naguine was sitting up feeding the baby and at one and the same time smoking like a chimney. Moreover, Django and all the visitors who had crowded into the tiny room were smoking too. When I explained to Django that the child was in danger of being stifled, he immediately forbade anyone to smoke anywhere near the bedroom.'

Emile Savitry had another story to tell about the house in Montmartre. 'When I came to Paris in the spring of 1944,' he says, 'I naturally went to see Django in the Avenue Frochot. We embraced like brothers meeting again after a long separation. I'd been there only a few minutes when Django said to me: 'Look, there's only one thing to do! You can't go back to Montparnasse again. You'll stay here. It's no trouble.'

“Yes, but my wife’s expecting.”

“Everybody’s expecting here, Naguine too!” he replied in a tone that admitted of no reply.

‘They fixed up a bed for my wife and me. But it was still very cold and so as to keep the fire going, Django kept burning the furniture piece by piece. Everything was thrown into the fireplace of the bedroom. It was through the bedroom you reached the studio. Studying the floor of that studio one day, Django turned to me: ‘Tell me now, what do you think of that? It’s pine, we should get a nice old blaze out of it!’ The ceiling of the studio was leaking badly and nobody could live in it because it was so cold...and there was the washing hung hopefully up to dry. So more often than not we spent our time in Django’s room on the first floor, although his bed took up most of the space. What was left of his bed I suppose I should say, since apart from the mattress only the headboard was left. The foot had long since gone by the board. ‘Meanwhile, Django had given a messenger-boy his orders. He came back carrying an enormous cardboard box. When we opened it we found a huge ham weighing forty or fifty pounds, some bread and a great lump of butter. Merchandise of this sort was practically impossible to come by at that time, especially in Paris. ‘Can I go now, Monsieur Django?’ the errand boy asked. ‘Not before you’ve brought me back three pounds of coffee, the best you’ve got!’ came the reply. And off the kid went.

‘Gus Viseur had come along to join us; Joseph was there with one or two other musicians and friends; and they went on playing until the morning. There was no question of any of us getting any sleep. Django was absolutely delighted to see me again.’

There was a garden in front of Mme Davis-Boyer’s house where her children used to amuse themselves throwing darts at a target nailed up on a tree. Django and his friend Fouad, always eager to find new pastimes, quickly took over the children’s game. They put their heart and soul into it, and spent most of the afternoon at it, stopping only when it grew too dark to see properly. Passers-by thought how sweet it was to see these two great children enjoying themselves innocently in this way. Not for a moment did they suspect that the game was by no means so innocent as it looked. In point of fact Django and his friend were playing for money. As usual Django was over confident in his skill and insisted on giving his opponent

several points start. Sometimes he would play at double or quits. At one of their sessions he lost the 150,000 francs he'd just earned.

Our guitarist's passion for taking risks was apparent in everything he did. 'When he wasn't playing darts,' Pierre Fouad recalls, 'Django used to take me along to the Place Pigalle for a game of billiards. He loved watching the champions, and generally speaking liked taking on better players than himself, precisely because they were better. Obviously he had to provoke them to get them to play with him, but when there were no champions on hand and he played with mere amateurs like me, he'd lose just the same. He was always too proud, allowing us far more points than was reasonable. So whichever way it went he was out of pocket.

'He was just as keen a poker player. After dinner one night at the Lido he fell in with a barman he found amusing. The barman suggested a game of poker. We went up to the fellow's flat but unfortunately for us the game had been carefully fixed beforehand! Two or three of them were in it together, scoundrels of the first order who hadn't scrupled to mark the cards. I threw in my hand after losing 50,000 francs, but Django, intent on recouping his losses, ended up 300,000 or 500,000 down the drain.'



Meanwhile the end of the war was drawing near. As the Allies advanced, however, air raids became more frequent and Django spent the better part of every night down the shelter, leaving it to his band to entertain the Roulotte's clientele. Between alerts he would go and look at his offspring, taking him out of his cradle at every turn and nursing him with pride. No longer did he think of taking to the road. The liberation of Paris found Django in this setting, worthy of a religious illustration.

The liberation!

Paris was on the point of being freed, and in the general excitement, as the first jeeps were making their appearance, Django just could not resist thinking of the frontiers that were being broken down, of the voyage of discovery he was to make at last, like some new Christopher Columbus. In his mind's eye he saw America, Hollywood, the skyscrapers, the land of breathtaking achievement, modern life incarnate, in short, a universe that measured up to his ideals. However, if the Americans were present in strength, America was still far away. The war was not over yet, but life in Paris was one great festive round, and the Allied forces were taking Montmartre by storm. And if most of the GIs were out for cognac and

mademoiselles, there were others who had but a single idea in their heads: to meet Django Reinhardt.

We knew very well that the guitarist had many admirers throughout the world, but never had we dreamed that his popularity was so great. You were always seeing tall, ingenuous-looking types in the street around Pigalle stop passers-by and ask them if they knew where Monsieur Django Reinhardt was playing. The modest quarters of the Hot Club de France were too small to contain the bands of enthusiasts who were after autographs. They wanted to know every detail of his life, all about his technique, what make his guitar was, if it was true he was deformed and so on. We even learned that newspapers abroad had announced his death several times during the war. When they came across the Roulotte, with 'Chez Django Reinhardt' written on the awning over the door, many GIs thought they were about to realize their life ambition. By now, however, Django had left the Roulotte and was playing at the Tabarin.

By day a colourful crowd of fans tried to keep up a conversation with Django – who spoke not a word of English – in the one room to which his small family had retired.

'Soon after the liberation,' Pierre Fouad goes on, 'while the Americans were still encamped in the Avenue de la Grande Armée, I'd opened at the Amiral with a nice little quartet. It wasn't long before Django looked in, accompanied by several American officers, the coloured journalist Allan Morrisson and a very pretty WAC, a redhead. She must have conjured up visions of Hollywood and California for him. He was obsessed by her.

'Fouad,' he said to me when the evening was over, 'these are some friends of mine. We're off to the Avenue de Friedland. There's a colonel there who likes jazz and wants to hear me play. Bring your kit along and ask Soudieux to bring his bass!' And off he went. Arriving at a smart hotel which had been requisitioned for American brasshats, we went into a drawing-room where there were three more WACs sitting on the floor. We played and Django showed them everything he knew. Then one of the officers who was there asked the redhead to sing. She sang *Embraceable You* and *Paper Doll*, two tunes we hadn't heard in France at the time. She had a fine voice, and Django, who was accompanying her by ear, was all smiles. He was happy not only because she sang in tune and her phrasing was good, but also because she was attractive and he was gratified to find himself in such pleasant surroundings.'

Whilst he was working at the Tabarin, Django doubled at the Olympia, which had been transformed for the occasion into a theatre for the American forces. Gerard Leveque remembers one or two details about the band's appearances there. 'The quintet,' he says, 'was well to the fore in an impressive programme that starred Fred Astaire. The first performance was on September 24, 1944. On the opening night, the members of the quintet were standing in the wings stealing glances at the American troops who made up the audience when a soldier passed nearby. It was Fred Astaire. In these circumstances he evidently cut a very different figure from the one we knew on the screen. When he caught sight of Django he rushed up to him.

"I know who you are!" he exclaimed. 'I heard you at the London Palladium in 1938 or 1939.'

'They started to chat; and when Fred Astaire took off his cheesecutter, we saw with astonishment that he was completely bald!

'On the second evening Django forgot his guitar. An American officer put a jeep and driver at our disposal. We set off for the Tabarin and once the guitar had been found drove back at top speed towards the Olympia. On the way we knocked over a pedestrian, leaving him more dead than alive on the pavement's edge. I rushed on to the stage with the precious guitar.

'Yvan was playing drums with us. I believe it was about then that summer-time ended, and our drummer was conspicuous by his absence. That made it very difficult indeed for a small group like ours. We got by all right so long as we were playing down tempo, but when we went into *Tiger Rag*, our final number, things began to go haywire. Django was very nervous and broke a string just as he was starting his solo. He turned to his brother, doubtless thinking to borrow his instrument; Nin-Nin latched on to the tempo as best he could and broke a string himself. Then Django had another string go, followed by a third. Beads of sweat stood out on our foreheads. There was only one thing to do, and that was to leap into the fray myself at this break-neck tempo and finish this *Tiger Rag* off as well as I could.

'We played for the French Army too, making a week's trip to Toulouse. When the train stopped at Montauban we left Django in the compartment and got out to have a drink in the buffet. It was only a short stop...and the train left without us. When we got to Toulouse there was nobody at the station and we didn't know what hotel Django was staying at. After telephoning a good number of different places we eventually found the right

one. Django was fast asleep. He'd booked the cases and the instruments into the left luggage and had kept the tickets on him.

'We returned to Paris for the second Glenn Miller concert. Naguine and Barelli were with us that evening. Django had the chance to record with some of the musicians in the band. Whether it's true or not I couldn't say for sure, but I've been told that Mel Powell took Django out with him one night to play in a nearby cabaret in the Rue Pigalle, after he'd come to listen to us at the Tabarin. They both began to play together, but after a short while Mel Powell closed the lid of his piano and just sat there listening to Django. Many of the musicians in the Miller band came to sit in with us at the Tabarin, including Peanuts Hucko and Bernie Previn; but there were others, too, and sometimes our band looked as though it was made up completely of servicemen.'



It was around this time that Django had the opportunity of interpreting the Mass which he had long had in mind. As early as 1936, in fact, he had conceived the idea of a religious work that he could leave his fellow gipsies, one that would be used on the occasion of the pilgrimage to les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, replacing the music of the 'foreigners'. When he came to look into the structure and rules of traditional works of this kind, however, he was discouraged by the difficulties and abandoned the project.

Only eight bars had been composed when he was asked to record his Mass in the Church of Saint-Louis-d'Antin. The radio van was there, but neither Leo Chauliac, who had the music and was to develop it, nor Django was present. All the officials were waiting. Gerard Leveque decided to jump into his car and eventually found the composer sleeping like a log, with a cold compress on his forehead. 'I don't give a damn,' Django mumbled, when they shook him to try to bring him to his senses. It is hardly necessary to point out that he had drunk more than was good for him the night before.

A new appointment was arranged, this time at the Chapel of the Institution des Jeunes Aveugles. This session, too, almost fell through, since Django forgot to get up; but in the end everything went off well. It was something of a revelation for the organist of the Sacré-Coeur. Never, he said, had he heard a Mass that respected the canons of harmonization so faithfully yet revealed such amazing originality. So interested was he, that he asked the composer whether he had written any other works of the same

kind, and also wished to know what studies he had undertaken. To put the finishing touch to this event, Django was asked to read a text into the microphone, one that had been especially prepared for the occasion...they were unaware that Django's knowledge of the written word was negligible!

It was around this time that the government banned dancing in the clubs. Since no other work was available Django signed for a new tour in the south, and even agreed to appear for nothing at Marseille, on the understanding that he would go over to North Africa. 'At the close of the year Django came to look for me,' says Gerard Leveque, 'and told me we were off to Marseille where we'd be playing for the US Army for three days. We stayed there all of six months! Not in Marseille itself, but in the Midi. Our base was the Hotel Rose-Thé at La Ciotat, a rehabilitation centre for French soldiers. We used to play all along the Côte d'Azur in military camps, hospitals and theatres, such as the Alcazar in Marseille, which had been requisitioned. We played for next to nothing. Only food and lodging were guaranteed. Django didn't have a penny to his name, but he wasn't worried in the slightest. He was very relaxed.'

'I was singing for the Americans when I came across Django,' Claude Robin recalls. 'It was at Nice, in the Hotel Negresco, where he was giving a concert for the military. The audience was made up of parachutists, airborne troops from the Middle West who were already in an advanced state of inebriation and had little time to spare for the band. They made such a noise that it was all you could do to hear the music. After the first number Django rose to his feet, picked up his guitar and left. When the soldiers saw this, they not only began to scream their heads off, but started fighting with the chairs and smashing the mirrors!'

Since Django was appearing regularly in the military camps along the Côte d'Azur he had his family travel down and settle in Bandol in a luxury flat with a bathroom and every refinement you could think of. In the meantime the Hot Club had received several interesting offers for his services from abroad, and sent off a veritable broadside of telegrams towards the Riviera. It was all in vain, however, Django just could not be found. He suddenly appeared in Nice when he was thought to be in Toulon, then in Monte Carlo, where he said good-bye to the small amount of money he had earned during the tour.

His wife Naguine remembers this period very clearly. 'A musician had told Django that they were waiting for him to go back to Paris,' she says.

‘In Cannes he ran across one of his cousins who had a caravan. ‘Since you’re off back to Paris,’ he said, ‘you might as well come with me, since that’s where I’m going too.’ But the car was just about done for; all the tread was worn off the tyres and we had a flat every five miles. And as luck would have it, a connecting-rod went ten miles outside Cannes. We telephoned Bandol and the Americans sent a breakdown truck. When we reached Bandol some characters who had just opened a big café asked Django to work there.

‘He was right out of cash, but he strung them along and asked for 10,000 francs a day, thinking they’d refuse, but they accepted. Unfortunately they were in the penicillin racket and a few days after he’d opened the police closed the place down, before he’d even seen the colour of their money. And then, broke as he was, Django agreed to play bowls with some local spivs and lost 100,000 francs. He had to make his getaway in the middle of the night. He hadn’t paid the winners a brass farthing, and was scared they’d smash his face in for him.

‘When he got back to Marseilles he met one of the American officers who had signed him on to play the camps. He said he could fix Django up with an engagement in the States.

‘How much do you want!’ he asked. ‘As much as Benny Goodman gets,’ came the reply.

‘However, once the officer mentioned that there was no official service as yet between the USA and Europe and he’d have to go by submarine, Django preferred to take to the road again, but not without having obtained a spare wheel and a can of petrol beforehand. In one of the places we stopped at, Django caught a miserable, little trout and decided he’d like to stay in the district. ‘Let’s stay here, Naguine,’ he said, ‘there’s some good fishing to be had!’ ‘

Later they broke down again and this time they were overtaken by Bouglione’s Circus. Luckily for them, Achille Zavatta came to their rescue, fixing them up with a load of old tyres and some petrol, and so the circus and the jalopy travelled together for part of the way.

Django reached Paris some time in October. He was immediately invited to play with the ATC band at the American base at Orly. This was an excellent group that Django had met some months before in the Midi. The band’s arranger, Lonnie Wilfong, had long admired Django and was particularly keen to make his acquaintance. In each town the band passed

through he came upon posters that proved Django had recently played there, but he never succeeded in linking up with him. One night, though, when the band was playing in Cannes, someone with a guitar under his arm asked if he could sit in. This was none other than Django Reinhardt. The session came to an end at daybreak.

Django, then, had come across this group yet again. On October 26 he was invited to go along to the AFN Studios to take part in their first broadcast to the American troops, which they wished to dedicate to the celebrated French guitarist. 'The rehearsal and the recording took place as though by enchantment, without incident or interruption of any kind. After conferring with Django Reinhardt, the bandleader showed the other musicians the solo passages he had reserved for him. The session went forward as smoothly as could be desired, with photographers' flashbulbs lighting up the studio from time to time.' ↓

≡ *Jazz Hot*, November 1945.

Django took advantage of this band's presence in Paris to make some records, and was also featured at the Salle Pleyel in the first concert he had given for a year. This concert was relayed by the AFN, the BBC and the French national network.

12

Reunion and America at Last

It was also some time in October that I learnt Stéphane Grappelly was on the line from London. We exchanged our first few words as the clock struck midnight. Whether it was because he was excited or because he was so unused to speaking in his native tongue, I don't know, but I can remember he had some difficulty in expressing himself, and even spoke with a slight English accent now and again.

Six years!...Stéphane asked for news of all the friends he had not seen since 1959, and then went on to talk of more serious matters, for it was the idea of forming the old string quintet once again that was behind this telephone call! Much time was needed, for a great deal of preparation would have to be put in hand and many formalities attended to. There was still a surprise for Stéphane, though. Django was at my side, eager to seize the receiver. When all the business details had been arranged and Stéphane was asking once more for news of Django, I cut in with 'Hold the line, I've got Django for you now'. Solemn as the occasion was, neither could find a word to say to the other. When Django heard Grappelly's voice he burst into uncontrollable laughter; and when Grappelly heard Django asking him how he was, he too collapsed with mirth. And so the conversation went on between Paris and London, punctuated by roars of laughter. Grappelly asked Django how his wife was keeping. Django told him he was the father of a fifteen-months-old boy and was now legally married to the woman he had been living with for the last twelve years or more. They spent almost an hour talking together, and Stéphane arranged to ring again the next day, for he still had much to tell Django and many questions to put to him.

From then onwards, events seemed to follow each other in rapid succession. In December, Django broadcast for the BBC. He was obsessed with his impending departure for England but, in the interim, broadcast with the quintet for the BBC, and was heard the following month with the ATC

band on a programme relayed to the United States. Django and Stéphane were under contract to different companies and, in view of their imminent reunion, negotiations were put in hand between Decca and His Master's Voice; whilst the BBC decided to devote a radio series to the newly created string quartet and to ease the formalities attendant upon Django's visit to England.

On a foggy morning in January 1946, Django, his wife and Chien-Chien, their son, also known as Babik, kissed grandmother good-bye and left their hotel in the Rue de Douai. Their luggage consisted of a suitcase, the inevitable guitar and a shopping basket containing the child's necessities, including a vacuum flask, which they had bought that very morning. Before meeting the BBC representatives who were to travel with them at the station, Django distributed the sheets, the remains of the furniture and other belongings to his relatives, little imagining he would see them again so quickly. Naguine complained that the child was dreadfully heavy to carry. They asked her what she had done with the pram that had been bought the year before. 'Oh, I left it on the beach when we came north,' she casually replied.



After a crossing in the course of which Django found some partners for a hand of poker (this time he won for a change), the little band arrived in London without incident and made their way to the flat Stéphane Grappelly had booked for them in his hotel. The plush apartment soon took on the familiar appearance of a gipsy encampment. Chien-Chien, ringing all the bells one after the other, had the whole staff rushing to see what he wanted. As soon as work was over Stéphane made his appearance, accompanied by two of his sidemen, who were all agog to meet Django, and especially keen to hear him play. At last the reunion was an accomplished fact. After embracings and reminiscences, Django, eager to hear his old colleague play again, learnt that he had left his violin behind. One of the musicians left in haste to fetch an instrument, and shortly afterwards, in an atmosphere rich in nostalgic memories, Stéphane hesitatingly played the first few bars of the *Marseillaise*, and Django, in turn, took up the tune. Without a moment's forethought it was the national anthem, solemn and impassioned, that they had chosen to play. In a foreign country these two reprobates had given vent to the kind of patriotic gesture one would never have thought them capable of! And they spent the rest of the night playing together, improvising on

tunes they had known so well ten years previously, or new songs, or melodies Django had composed during the war.

From the very first note, as though they had never ceased to play together, they rediscovered the miraculous communion of old. Nothing seemed impossible. Stéphane was delighted to have Django beside him once more; his inspiration flowed as freely as ever, his instrument seemed to play itself. From time to time he cast a glance of confidence, of gratitude even, towards Django, who for his part was no less moved to find the man who could best express his ideas playing with him once again.

The bottles of gin and whisky were empty, the ashtrays brimming over with butt-ends, but they were still swinging when dawn broke over Green Park, furnishing a perfect setting for *Night and Day*.

The day after next, at a recording session for which the string quintet was re-formed, an attempt was made to recreate the atmosphere and the music of that memorable night. It might well have been the beginning of a new and fruitful association between the two men, but, unfortunately, a few days later Django was taken ill. He was moved as quickly as possible to the French hospital where he underwent an operation that put paid to all his expectations in England. The programmes scheduled by the BBC and the tour throughout the British Isles were cancelled, leaving Django to return to Paris with his family once he was well again.

Though it had been something of a relief for him to leave Paris for a while, beset as it still was by post-war problems, he was nonetheless content to feel the Montmartre streets beneath his feet once more; little had he thought to see them again so soon. And yet he found neither work nor prosperity. The cabaret that had been fitted out for him in the guise of a gipsy encampment had been forced to close, and finally he fell back on Le Rodéo, flattered to think that he would be the nominal manager for a short while. For this occasion he formed a quintet made up of young musicians with little or no experience. Soon, though, Le Rodeo closed its doors, and Django relapsed into a vegetative existence, getting up at three in the morning to breakfast at the Ambiance, a club where his brother Joseph was appearing. Often he would borrow his guitar to play one or two numbers. One night, when Django was building chorus upon chorus in the most inspired fashion imaginable, a stout client complained bitterly to the manager. 'I've come to hear Django Reinhardt,' he expostulated, 'not this second-rate guitarist!'

‘Another night,’ recalls Eddie Bernard, ‘after Django had played in the club where his brother was working, we went off to the lounge of an hotel called the Piccadilly, a pretty dingy sort of place on the whole. We’d often go along there during a break or when work was over. About two or three in the morning the boss came in.

“I’ve just found a wonderful girl!’ he said.

“Bring her along, then!’ Django replied.

‘When the girl got there we started to chat. Noticing Django’s guitar, she said: ‘You’re a guitarist, are you?’

“Yes,’ said Django.

“There’s only one guitarist as far as I’m concerned,’ she went on. ‘And that’s Tino Rossi.’

‘Django fixed it so that the girl would ask him to play. When she did, he turned towards me.

“I can’t play just like that,’ he complained. ‘Sing something for me!’

‘I ought to point out that I’m a dreadful singer, but all the same I suggested *Good Morning Blues*.

“But I don’t know what key I sing in,’ I added.

“Don’t worry about that,’ came the reply. And the instant I came out with the word ‘blues’ Django was there with the right chord; which is enough to prove, if proof were needed, what an extraordinary ear the man had. There was no doubt about it, my singing was awful, but I only had ears for the terrific guitar accompaniment he was fashioning, though it was all he could do to keep from laughing. To be brief, he gave us a wonderful demonstration of his art. But all the girl could say was: ‘Yes, but you don’t play the guitar as well as Tino Rossi.’↓

≡ For those who are unaware of the fact, it should be pointed out that although the famous French crooner habitually appeared with a guitar, he was quite unable to play the instrument.

‘Django was flabbergasted. He shook with laughter.

“It’s just not possible!’ he exclaimed.’



Unable to find any musical outlets, Django devoted his leisure hours to painting. With his last few thousand francs he bought brushes, canvases and paint, and spent his days sitting at an easel. Eddie Bernard recalls how he came to be interested in painting. ‘A few days before he left for England,’ he says, ‘Django came to dinner with us. Noticing the pictures on the walls

he asked me whose work they were. 'My father did them,' I replied. And then he asked if painting was difficult.

"It's no more difficult than the guitar," my father told him. 'All you need is brushes, paints and a canvas.'

"I see," said Django. Three months later, after he got back from London, he began his first pictures.'

Ever on the scent of novelty, reporters came to interview him, and advised him to hold a show. Moreover, Django was prouder of his painting than of his music now, and was quite happy to show his visitors everything he had done in the way of pictures.

In the meantime, correspondence with the USA suggested that a tour on the other side of the Atlantic was growing more and more likely. Since personal affairs were making it necessary for me to travel to the USA, I made up my mind to try to bring back the contract we had looked forward to for so long. Meanwhile Django was to record the music for a film and this project too filled him with great enthusiasm.

The outlook, then, was very much brighter for Django when he came to say good-bye to me one afternoon in the Rue Chaptal. After promising to write every day (!) and giving me his last words of advice about the prospective American contract, he invited me to come and have a look at his tourer. Driven by his brother, it contained a jumbled heap of suitcases, saucepans, old tyres and one or two shady-looking confederates. Worthy of a 1920 western, the old crate did its best to emulate a Bastille Day fireworks display before vanishing in a cloud of smoke.

When I returned from New York in September, Django had just left for Switzerland with his new quintet, which was made up for the most part of young musicians. The series of concerts he gave there abounded in amusing anecdotes. In Neufchatel, Django came across one of his 'cousins' who lived locally. He spent some time with him, and when he turned up at the concert it was in sports gear, with a red sock on one foot and a blue one on the other, and carrying his shoes in his hands. Since the electrician's room was right up in the roof and there was no means of communication between it and the stage, the programme had been carefully prepared. Bright lights were to be used for the up-tempo numbers, soft lights for the slow ones. Michel de Villers was to announce the titles of the tunes. No provision, alas, had been made for accidents, and when the curtain rose as the quintet was playing its signature tune it caught Michel de Villers's reed and damaged it.

In the stress of the moment Michel announced the second tune instead of the first, and so the concert was played with soft lighting for the fast numbers and garish lighting for the mood pieces. The band's manager noticed the error at once and tried to put it right but the electrician refused to listen to him. 'No,' he said, showing the list he had been given before the concert began, 'it's all down here on paper.'

Just as they were about to eat one night in Zurich they noticed that Django's guitar was missing. Had he left it on the train? Was it still in the left luggage? The concert was due to start in twenty minutes. Whilst they were busy looking for it, Django sat down to dine at a table on the forecourt of the Baur-au-Lac, and ordered a thorough-going banquet! Meanwhile the band's manager arrived. After getting in touch with the railway station he had found the instrument in the hotel's baggage store. They did their best to hurry the waiters up. 'Serve everything at once,' they suggested. 'That's quite out of the question,' the head waiter replied, 'we've never done anything like that!'

Instead of a fortnight Django stayed in Switzerland for nearly a month, which enabled him to spend everything he had earned there. Nor did he let anyone know how he was, or send his address through. His return was urgently awaited so that the final details of his American contracts could be arranged. For its part the film company began to panic and decided to have appeals broadcast on the radio.

In mid-October Django arrived at last, cutting an imposing figure in the new clothes he had bought in Switzerland. He proudly announced that he had signed a contract for a British agent and was due to leave for the USA the following week to appear with Duke Ellington. The film people would have none of this; they had made up their minds not to let Django go until the music was finished. Although he already visualized himself on the other side of the Atlantic, he was enchanted by the thought of doing the music for a film and decided to stay. When he stopped day-dreaming, though, and got down to the actual composition, insurmountable difficulties arose, because he could neither read nor write music. Without delay it was necessary to find an orchestrator who would be able faithfully to transcribe his ideas in the time available. No better choice could have been made than Andre Hodeir. An admirer of Django and a rival of Stéphane Grappelly, a musician who was at ease in any context, seeing that he had won many prizes at the Conservatory, he was now to make his debut as the musical

director of a film. Django was very pleased when he learned that Hodeir lived only a few miles away from the house he had just bought for his family in the suburbs. He could concentrate seriously on his task all night long while the family was asleep, without being bothered by the continual outbursts of Chien-Chien, who made work quite impossible. After seeing the film, Django and Hodeir hailed a cab. After stopping in the Place Pigalle, where Django bought several thousands of francs worth of cooked meat, they gave the driver the address. He hesitated for a moment, thinking some dirty work was afoot. However, noticing the guitar Django had put in the next seat, he asked Andre' if this was the famous Django. From that moment on, no more charming driver could be imagined. He told them he was a guitarist and was familiar with Django Reinhardt's compositions and that he was a dreadful singer; Django took good advantage of all this chatter to make a few extra trips!

As might have been expected, Django's new suburban home turned out to be a broken down building made out of plaster and cement. It stood on some waste land that had once been cultivated. The fence had been knocked down to let the van through that had brought the remains of the furniture from the place in the Avenue Frochot. In less than no time the setting had been transformed into one worthy of the zone and the garden was already littered with old saucepans, chamber-pots and camp-beds. They worked solidly throughout the night and arranged to meet at the film company's offices the next day. Needless to relate, Django forgot to turn up.

Not knowing where Django was, Hodeir went back to his house, but he was out. For three days it was impossible to find him, and by now time was getting very short. When they eventually unearthed him, it was to learn that he was due to leave the very next day. The music was far from finished. In vain had they tried to find the score of *Manoir de Mes Reves* that had been done some years previously, but it had to be set down all over again. Furthermore, the financial details still remained to be settled. The discussions concerning these took on the nature of an epic; Django considered that it was all 'his' music and refused even to consider meeting a percentage of the orchestration fees. He had also visualized himself taking part in the opening scenes conducting the orchestra...in the end he had to be content with a few photographs. A final decision was reached regarding composer's rights and orchestration fees only the next day on the station platform, at the very moment when the train was about to leave.

Django arrived from the US Consulate, provided with his visa at last, a few minutes before the train went. Without so much as a toothbrush for luggage, he just had time to wave good-bye to the people who had come to wish him luck.



Like the sinner who leaves this ignoble world to meet his judge eternal, Django Reinhardt arrived in the USA without any luggage whatsoever. He had not even bothered to take his guitar, thinking that the American firms would vie with each other for the honour of presenting him with an instrument. This was very far from being the case and in the end he was obliged to buy one. What surprises awaited him! He told us of his tour across the States, in particular the first trip he undertook with Duke Ellington in the special carriage reserved for the band. Whilst he shared a two-berth compartment with Duke, the sidemen occupied the sleeping-car proper. Before lying down Django had to go through the carriage to get to the toilet and was flabbergasted to see that all the musicians were wearing pants with flowers on them! He just could not resist taunting them in English. 'You're crazy!' he told them, so astonishing did it seem to him. Returning to his own compartment, he was on the point of telling Ellington all about it; but the first thing he noticed on sliding back the door was Duke's underwear, which was even more gaudy than his musicians'! There was an epilogue to this little story: when he got back to New York, Django asked some French friends of his to get him a set of flowered pants...not daring to go and buy them himself!

The tour's first concert took place in the Public Music Hall in Cleveland, Ohio, on November 4, 1946. As reported in *Newsweek*, November 18, 1946, there was only a twenty-minute rehearsal before the concert and when Duke asked Django what key he would play his first number in he failed to understand the English term.

'There's no 'key'!' he said.

'But there must be one,' Ellington replied.

'Don't worry about me! I'll be all right.'

After Cleveland came the Civic Opera House in Chicago, and then St Louis, Detroit, Kansas, Pittsburg and finally New York, where Duke's band gave two concerts at Carnegie Hall on November 23 and 24. Until then everything had gone smoothly. Presented as a soloist by Ellington and accompanied by the band, Django had made an excellent impression, but it

was the New York appearances that would decide whether or not the tour was a success. Articles had already appeared in the daily Press and in most of the magazines praising the 'amazing gipsy', but the majority of the critics would be present in New York and it was upon their verdict that Django's fortunes would depend.

'On Tuesday evening I accompanied Django to the station where he caught the train to Philadelphia. He is to be featured in a further series of concerts there with Duke Ellington. I expect you will wish to know how he has fared in New York. I went along to see him on the evening of his first concert and he was really pleased to see someone from Paris whom he knew. Django was a trifle on edge without his own guitar. A temporary replacement had been found, but the instrument was too heavy and had no lead to the microphone. The concert finally began at 8.30. The hall was packed out. I can safely say that by far the greater part of the audience was made up of admirers who had waited for this moment for ten years. Duke played as wonderfully as ever and announced Django at 10.50. He had no arrangement to play but was backed by Duke. This was something of a disappointment, for the public had expected to see Django and the orchestra on-stage at the same time, but nevertheless Django received a great ovation and took six curtain calls. The next night he arrived at Carnegie Hall at eleven o'clock after Duke had regretfully announced that he would not appear; but he brought the concert to a close all the same, amidst thunderous applause.' ↓

≡ Jimmy Wieser (*Jazz Hot*, N°12, December 1946).

When the concert was over Django was asked to explain his appalling behaviour. He did so with a good grace. It appears he had met the French boxer Marcel Cerdan. He was very happy to find a Frenchman at last with whom he could chat about France; time had passed quickly, Django paying it little heed; and when he finally realized how late it was, he was already overdue. He leapt into a cab and asked to be driven to Carnegie Hall... We shall never know what the driver thought he said, but as it happened he was taken to the other side of the city, and it was only after a lengthy succession of tribulations that he reached the hall just as the concert was ending. He was wearing a lounge suit and had no guitar! Someone had to be sent off hurriedly to collect it for him while Duke spun out his programme. Without having the time to tune it Django eventually made his entrance. Agreed, he was applauded, he even took several bows, but the critics were not so kind

as they might have been, and it is likely this incident had a great deal to do with the failure of his American tour.

When it was finished Django settled in New York before going on to work at Café Society Uptown. Larger than the 52nd Street clubs, but less intimate, this establishment was noted for its French-Italian staff, whose informality was reminiscent of Paris. The resident group was led by Edmond Hall. At last our prodigal made his appearance on a special stand that had been fitted up for him. Accompanied by the band's rhythm section, he played his four solos a day on an American electric guitar which could hardly be said to bring out the delicacy of his style.

When I asked him later for his impressions of America, Django seemed to me to have lost most of his illusions. He was far from impressed by the American mentality, above all that of the women. Even the cars no longer had their old appeal for him; they were all too much alike. As you will recall, he had left his instrument behind in France, under the delusion that the different American firms would compete with each other for the honour of producing his dream guitar; and so he was delighted to see it once again, the good old 'Made in France' model that Maurice Selmer sent him with his best wishes, and which I brought along with me that very evening.

'My friend,' he told me, 'all the Americans will wish this was their guitar! At least it's got some tone to it, you can hear the chords like you can on the piano...don't talk to me about their tinpot guitars any more!'

He drew large audiences at the Café Society. The public applauded insistently every night, but he refused to give any encores, and both his impresario and the manager of the club complained of his 'lack of co-operation'. When he was asked later why he took this attitude, he declared that he had simply wished to respect the terms of the contract and was terrified of playing to an unfamiliar audience.

He was staying in a smart hotel off Broadway, where his two-room suite was constantly filled with friends who came to pass the time of day in idle conversation. Although he knew only a few words of English, he managed to make himself understood. Django welcomed his visitors in lordly fashion, ordering drinks or even meals for them. I had some records with me when I arrived and Django immediately gave a friend thirty dollars to go out and buy a record-player at the nearest store. There was almost always a Frenchman there: his boundless affection for his compatriots is more easily understood when it is realized with what deep nostalgia he

thought of France, his wife and his son. Lonely foreigner that he was in a land so different from his own, one can imagine with what delight he met Marcel Cerdan and the tiny French colony in New York which included Jean Sablon, then singing at the Versailles. It was with Sablon that he duly celebrated the French champion's victory over Abrams at Madison Square Garden.

Marcel Cerdan and Django were often to be seen together. After saying good-bye to their friends one by one they would wander about the New York streets until daybreak. A French friend is reputed to have come upon them unawares in the vicinity of Times Square around five o'clock one morning. They were gazing sad-eyed at a gas lamp which reminded them of Paris, and which, so they said, they regularly came to look at.

The American way of life, needless to say, was unlikely to appeal to our hero's independent turn of mind. Django complained, too, about the women, who were all terribly cold to his way of thinking. He was also annoyed by the hypocritical American conventions that made it difficult for him to frequent the women of his choice. He overcame this obstacle by using art as a pretext and asking 'models' up to his flat. This was how he came to paint so many nudes during his stay in New York.

After the engagement at the Café Society, Django lingered on to see whether any of the jobs he had been promised in California would materialize. His visit to the USA was drawing to a close. Everything had happened as though some overriding influence had made failure the only possible outcome. Tired of waiting and disappointed, one fine day Django decided to pack his bags and return to France.

13

Home Again

He arrived in Paris on February 13, 1947. On March 6 he opened at the Boeuf sur le Toit, first of all with a big band made up of odds and ends, as one might say, and later with a small group of six musicians. It was here too that he gave his first art show. During March, Stéphane Grappelly came to Paris for a few days. Private affairs brought him there, but he also wished to examine the possibilities of forming the string quintet again. Advantage was taken of his visit to hold a recording session. It took place on March 26 in an artist's studio that the Swing Company generally used for this purpose. During the Boeuf sur le Toit engagement Django was approached by a film company to see whether he was interested in recording the music for a picture that Marcel Carne was directing, *La Fleur de l'Age*. The recording did indeed take place, but the film was never made.

The job at the Bceuf lasted two months and was immediately followed by a tour in Belgium, for which Django reassembled his 1941 quintet with Hubert Rostaing, Emmanuel Soudieux, Eugene Vees and Pierre Fouad. 'So as to persuade me to go to Brussels,' says Hubert Rostaing, 'Django promised me ten thousand a day, but when it came to settling up he disclaimed all knowledge of the incident. 'I said no such thing,' he declared. He was sincere enough, mind you. He'd just forgotten. 'All right, then, since you say so,' he conceded.

'Unfortunately, when we came to work out the money, there wasn't a penny left, since the organizer had absconded with the takings. So I went along to see a young fellow I knew at Decca, and we recorded six sides for which Django was well paid...and all I got was a measly few thousand francs.'

It is now Pierre Fouad's turn to take up the story. 'After we'd played in a large restaurant in Ghent,' he recalls, 'we went back to the hotel. My wife found a cockroach in one of her slippers just as she was putting them on. I

could hear Django joking with Ninine in the corridor so I peeped out of the door and told him about it.

“You’d better watch out, Django, the place is full of cockroaches.”

‘Django winked at me craftily.

“Cockroaches?”

‘Ninine – Eugene Vees, that is – never was one to catch on quickly.

“What’s that?” he inquired. ‘Is it bad?’

“I’d say!” replied Django. ‘You’ll have to keep a sharp eye about you. Do you know what cockroaches do? You don’t? Well, I’ll tell you. They climb up the walls to the ceiling. They wait, until you fall asleep. They drop off into your mouth, crawl down into your belly and start gnawing away. Believe me, Ninine, you’re for it. You always sleep with your mouth wide open.’

‘Ninine was absolutely terrified and didn’t get a wink of sleep that night.’



And now, as an interlude, we have an anecdote of Naguine’s, relating to an incident which took place in France soon after the war.

‘We’d set off with Nin-Nin’s caravan,’ she recalls. ‘It was drawn by a large American sedan in which Django and I slept. The first night we stopped in a square in a tiny village. A sign proclaimed ‘For Gipsies’. We didn’t read it closely. We just parked there without more ado. Now we were working gipsies,[↓] not just gipsies, and had no right to park on their land.

[↓] = *Forains* in the text (translator). This term applies mainly to those people who make their living out of the open-air amusement parks that visit towns and villages once a year and only stay in one place for a week or so. Some gipsies belong to this category, working as fortunetellers, etc.

‘At that point two gendarmes arrived on the scene. Both of them had great red shiny noses!

“Got your identity card?” they asked.

“What’s that you say?” Django replied. ‘Never heard of it.’

“We’re in for some fun now,’ they chuckled. ‘You’ll be for it.’

“Have it your own way!” came the reply.

‘The year before Django had given a concert for the Prefet of Troyes, who knew him well. ‘When you come back,’ he had said, ‘bring your wife with you! We’ll be only too happy to make you welcome!’

‘By now the gendarmes were getting vexed.

“If you haven’t got your identity card, let’s see your work permit.’

“I haven’t got one!’

“Your log book?’

“I haven’t got one!’

“Your driving licence?’

“I haven’t got one!’

‘By now the two gendarmes were rubbing their hands with glee.

“Where’s your brother gone?’ one of them asked. ‘I daresay he’s off tickling trout, isn’t he?’

“How do you mean, tickling trout? We don’t tickle trout, officer! We don’t even know what that means!’

“You’re for it, right enough!’

‘It was then I showed them all Django’s fishing tackle. There were five or six rods, jack rods, ordinary rods, fly rods, landing nets...

‘Django was set on infuriating them.

“There’s plenty more things you can charge us with. Go and have a look at the rear-light. It doesn’t work.’ And on and on he went.

‘By this time the gendarmes didn’t know where they were, I can tell you.

“Whoever are you?’ one of them asked.

“Ah, that’s a secret.’

“I don’t know why we don’t haul you off to the station.’

“Haul away, go on, and you’ll hear from the Prefet of Troyes,’ Django replied, mentioning the Préfet’s name.

“But who *are* you?’

“That’s a secret, I tell you!’ And then he added impressively:

“Django Reinhardt’s my name!’

“Django Reinhardt? Whoever’s that?’

“That’s me. I suppose you’ve never heard of Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman or Louis Armstrong?’

“What’s all that you’re on about? Come on, the summons or pay up!’

“Oh, no, I’m not paying up so that you can go and get drunk on cheap wine with my cash. You can send the summons to me at home. And if you’d like to take a bet on, I’ll wager you’ll get a fortnight’s notice!’

‘Django ended up by making them absolutely furious!

“Go on then! What are you waiting for?’

“We’ll be back to get you in ten minutes flat! Don’t you budge an inch!”

‘And off they went. Maybe they telephoned. That was the last we saw of them.’



Let us revert now to the tour the quintet undertook in the summer of 1947. ‘In July,’ remembers Eddie Bernard, ‘the quintet worked in Germany for several months. We had a poor welcome from the characters who looked after the Special Service activities. Half-civilians, half-soldiers, some of them thought musicians could be treated like common privates.

‘As you know, Django hated carrying anything that was heavy. So he left his amplifier behind, thinking that all the places he’d work in would be rigged up with the right kind of equipment. That was so with the Star Dust Club – both with the soldiers and the officers. But after we’d spent four days in Heidelberg, we were moved on to a so-called country club out in the sticks between Heidelberg and Mannheim.

‘This club catered for the other ranks, who spent most of their time drinking and shouting. There was no microphone, and after three numbers which nobody could possibly have heard, the master of ceremonies lost his temper and ordered us to stop. He got on the line to Frankfurt. ‘I asked you to send your star turn,’ he shouted. ‘And what have we got? Some goddam lousy second rate outfit...’

‘We were switched to Bad-Neuheim, and it was here we met an absolutely charming fellow by the name of Perry. He looked after everything, took us round all the clubs, and, to top it all, found an amplifier for us. He fixed it so that it would work with Django’s guitar, which he carried around himself. Bad-Neuheim was the Vichy of occupied Germany. Everybody fraternized and our stay there was very pleasant indeed.

‘We still had ten days to do in Germany when they moved us on to Frankfurt. Once we got there, everything began to go wrong again. Nobody cared less about us and the second night we were supposed to play in a hall that had no amplification system. Django’s guitar broke, and since he didn’t want to have to go through the country club business again, he refused to play. At that the Special Service authorities said they’d send us back to France lock, stock and barrel...and without paying us so much as a penny!

‘Django had an infection of the throat and so he went to see an American doctor. The doctor prescribed gargling with cooking salt...but

Django would have none of this. He said it would be the death of him! It was thanks to a fellow who was on the AFN staff that we were able to work our contract out.

‘During the radio show we did for the AFN, Django devised two new themes. One was called *This Kind O’ Friend*, which we did together. The other was called *Tell Mozart*, which Django composed at Mannheim and which was later called *Diminishing Blackness*. He recorded it later with Grappelly under the title of *Diminishing*.

‘When we left Frankfurt, the person who was in charge of the Special Service branch was really odious to us.

‘If you’ve stayed on,’ he said scornfully, ‘it’s only because one of the AFN executives intervened on your behalf. Take it from me, you’re not likely to return here in a hurry!’ ‘

Once back in Paris, the quintet recorded a long series of programmes for the Anne-Marie Duverney ‘Surprise-Partie’ show on the French national network. In the autumn of that same year, 1947, Stéphane Grappelly came to Paris. The string quintet was re-formed and gave a concert in the Salle Pleyel. This led to an engagement of several weeks at the ABC in the early part of the next year.

‘Django has certainly not played so well in public for many years. Some of his choruses recalled the splendid improviser we once knew so well. It was impossible to know which was the most impressive, the richness of his melodic invention, his technical virtuosity or the pungency of his accompaniments. And yet somehow the old flame, the old urge to create seems to have left him; but perhaps that is merely a personal impression’ (Daphnis, *Jazz Hot*, December 1947).

Django was living in a picturesque flat in the Place Pigalle. He had converted the largest room into a studio. This was not the time to talk music to him. Whatever you asked him, he would reply: ‘Don’t talk to me about music. At present, I’m painting.’

There is no doubt that he was absorbed by the aesthetic preoccupations painting offered him: it was not so much representation that concerned him, as the meaning of colour and composition. Instinctively he was drawn by the basic problems of form.

As his child grew, his love for him increased. He had an immense admiration for Babik.

‘Whenever we go to the pictures,’ he claimed, ‘Babik can tell straightaway just by the music whether it’s an American film!’

Django liked to go down to the forecourt of the café beneath his flat, taking his boy with him. One day he asked Hubert Rostaing along there for a drink.

‘Do you know, Hubert,’ he whispered to him. ‘My son’s already got an eye for the girls. He’s got what it takes! He looks at their legs. He’ll be a real tough guy.’

On several occasions Django’s co-operation was sought for different ballets. Serge Lifar envisaged producing a choreography based on his *Bolero*; and Yvette Chauvire thought of creating a free ballet on one of his improvisations, but, needless to relate, Django was away from home on the day the rehearsal was to take place. He was reported to be in a billiard-hall on the Avenue de Wagram. Nepo, Yvette Chauvire’s husband, rushed along there and found him in a large room on the second floor, pale-faced and miserable, saying good-bye to the last few notes of the three hundred thousand franc roll he had taken along with him!

Django and Stéphane appeared at the ABC in February 1948. Dizzy Gillespie had just arrived in Paris with his big band. He visited Django in his dressing-room and played with him. About this time the Nice Festival took place; following upon the general hue and cry occasioned by the absence of prominent French jazzmen, the quintet was engaged at the last minute to take part in the closing concerts.

Stéphane Grappelly recalls an amusing incident which happened the same year. ‘The Perriers told me one day,’ he says, ‘that their friend, M. Kosciuszko, the Private Secretary to the President of the Republic, and a great admirer of Django to boot, would like us to go along one evening. A rendezvous was duly arranged. As had been agreed, we went to pick up Django in the Place Pigalle. Naturally he wasn’t there. Naguine explained that Django had felt nervous at the last minute. She wasn’t sure where he’d gone, but she obviously had a pretty shrewd idea. Somewhat disappointed not to have Django with us, we left for the President’s residence. There was no question of being late for dinner.

‘After dinner was over, M. Kosciuszko remarked that it was a pity Django wasn’t present.

“You could have played for us,’ he said.

“I’ve got a fair idea where he is,’ I said. ‘He’s certainly not at the Opera! It’s more than likely he’s at his favourite billiard hall!’

‘As might have been expected, M. Kosciuszko took me at my word.

“Why not go and get him!’ he exclaimed.

‘He ordered the car and off we went to Montmartre. I suggested we went to Django’s place first to make sure he hadn’t come home and also to collect his guitar. When we arrived Naguine was so taken aback to see M. Kosciuszko that she couldn’t help admitting that her husband was indeed at the billiard hall. We drove straight there and needless to say found Django in full swing. But he was hardly dressed for the occasion. Often, as you well know, he was as smart as a new pin. This time, however, he was wearing a baggy suit, a pair of old slippers and a little cap that added the final touch of local colour. He couldn’t have shaved for two days. He was so astonished to be found out that he followed us without so much as a murmur.

‘When we reached the Faubourg St Honore, Django was so surprised to be driven into the President’s Palace that when the Republican Guard presented arms he thought it was for him. Feeling the carpets beneath his feet and seeing all the mirrors and the elaborate furnishings, he was suddenly taken with panic to find himself in such surroundings, dressed as he was.

‘Madame Kosciuszko received him most courteously, just as though he had come to present his credentials.

“Have you dined, Django?’ she asked.

‘Django might easily have replied in the affirmative, but in his embarrassment said no, he hadn’t. The instant afterwards he regretted it. Madame Kosciuszko ordered a special collation to be brought to him. At this, one or two of the people there smiled sarcastically at each other at the thought of the spectacle they were about to enjoy.

‘Little, however, did they know the real Django Reinhardt.

‘When the crucial moment came he sat down by himself at his little table, and without making the least conscious effort let them all see the stuff he was made of. To my way of thinking, it must have come as quite a shock to anyone who expected to see an ogre feeding. He put all thought of his attire aside and I am convinced they all realized they were in the presence of a veritable Oriental prince.

‘When Django had finished we went into the drawing-room to play. Everybody was amazed, or pretended to be; but Django, impressed by the

surroundings, played magnificently, probably imagining that this audience understood his music better than another.'

There followed another tour in England. 'When we arrived in London,' recalls Emmanuel Soudieux, 'we went straight to our usual hotel. We left our luggage in reception and went down to dine in the hotel's restaurant. When we got back, however, it was to find that all our cases had disappeared. Django, Challin Ferret and I didn't have a thing left, not even a toothbrush! All we had were the clothes we stood up in. We had to hire dinner-jackets from a second-hand clothing shop. They had enormous great flaps on the pockets. We felt ridiculous and had little enthusiasm for playing.

'As usual Django had all his belongings with him in his luggage, but although he'd lost everything he was calmer than any of us. He didn't even have a clean shirt left; but as soon as he'd bought a new shirt and a handkerchief he didn't give a thought to his losses. At the police station in Tottenham Court Road, where I acted as translator for him, he just couldn't help bursting into laughter. He laughed so much that in the end he had the police themselves doubled up with mirth.'

In their disappointment the supporting musicians went back to Paris. As for Django, he telephoned his wife to ask her to bring over some clean shirts and underwear and one or two suits for him, and the British tour went on with Stéphane Grappelly and three English musicians.

In the autumn Django was back in Paris again. On Sunday afternoons he appeared at the tea-dances at the Boeuf sur le Toit, where Hubert Fol, his brother Raymond, Dick Collins, Jack Smalley and Richie Frost were playing, that is to say the 'Be-bop Minstrels'. He seemed to take great pleasure in playing this new music with the youngsters; indeed Django had always been passionately interested in anything that was new.

In the last week of November 1948, the quintet appeared in Brussels. It played throughout the first half of a variety show that starred Georges Ulmer. 'Django and I bought a tape recorder,' says Hubert Rostaing. 'At that time it was the latest thing and we spent the afternoons playing with it. For instance, we recorded all the animal noises you could think of to amuse his son – and it was with this machine of Django's that they taped the concert which was issued on record.

'Django had brought Babik to Brussels with him. He was four years old at the time and grabbed everything he could lay hands on in the different

stores. His father was extremely proud of him. Sometimes he'd tell me about his exploits when he got to the theatre in the evening.

'Just see what my son's pinched,' he'd exclaim admiringly.'

A tour in Italy followed. 'In January, Django Reinhardt and Stéphane Grappelly, accompanied by three Italian musicians, played for just over a month at the Rupe Tarpea in Rome,' says Christian Livorness. The manager of the place, knowing Livorness was a keen enthusiast, had told him the previous December that he was looking for a good jazz group. Livorness suggested he book Django Reinhardt and Stéphane Grappelly.

'When I ran into him a week or so later,' Livorness goes on, 'he announced triumphantly that contracts had been signed and they would begin in January.'

'The Rupe Tarpea is quite a smart place. It's in two parts. There's the restaurant where a band plays during dinner, with all sorts of cabaret acts. The other part's reserved for dancing with two bands appearing. The quintet played for dancing and also appeared during an intermission in the restaurant.'

'Django was billed as 'Three Fingers Lightning'. He played a guitar speciality rather like *Appel Indirect*. The quintet had a successful run there, and when I met the manager a short while afterwards he said he was very pleased with the group's performance and would be very happy to have them back any time.'

'Since Django wasn't too happy with the rhythm section,' Stéphane recalls, 'we put a little number together that featured just the two of us. I accompanied Django on piano. We played at the opening ceremony of an enormous cinema in Naples, the Metropoli, and then went on to work with a local rhythm section at a club in Milan.'



When he returned to Paris, Django could find no employment and hung up his guitar. He was as deeply disappointed by the American tour, which he had hoped would lead to world-wide acclaim, as by the desertion of a public whose idol he had been only a few years before.

And so, in 1949, he sold his flat in the Place Pigalle, bought a big American car – a Lincoln – and a trailer, and prepared once more to take to the open road; but the car was constantly breaking down, and he finally ended up near Le Bourget where he found a new camping-ground.

It was about this time that a rather unpleasant episode, certainly an extremely disagreeable one for our guitarist, took place. Andre Ekyan was there, and remembers it well. 'I hadn't seen Django for months, for years maybe, when I ran into him one afternoon in the spring of 1949.

"Well,' I said, 'where are you working?'

"Nowhere.'

"Why's that?'

'It was then he showed me his mouth. All his front teeth were missing.

"Obviously I can't work like that.'

"You'll have to get fixed up.'

"I know, but I'm too scared.'

'I telephoned a friend who was a dentist and arranged to go along at once. Then I gripped Django firmly by the arm and took him along to the surgery. I had a lot of trouble persuading Django to agree to undergo treatment. In the end he agreed, but only on condition that he was given gas, and that I'd be there at his side. So I was present at the extraction. I held his hand as he was going under. It was a good job he had gas. He had to have six teeth out!

'While he was unconscious an incident occurred that might have had serious consequences. Django swallowed a clot of blood that blocked his throat. At one point his face began to go blue. The dentist pushed an instrument down his gullet, started the air pump, and got him breathing again. It was touch and go for a minute or two.

'A few days later Django had his new set in, and we could look forward to the future with a good deal more confidence. With a name like his on the bills I thought I could get whatever I asked for his services. So I sent off a few letters, made a few telephone calls and went round to see the agents. It wasn't as easy as I'd thought, but we managed to work more or less continuously for a whole year.

'We started in the spring with a month's engagement at the Pavillon de l'Elysee. With that kind of clientele we fell absolutely flat, though I must admit it was partly our fault. When you come to think of it, it's always the performer's fault if he's not a success. The summer season went off quite smoothly at the Casanova in Le Touquet. In the autumn we undertook a concert tour in the provinces, starting in the south-east with Villeur-banne, Grenoble and the Côte d'Azur. It went fairly well, I suppose, but there just weren't enough dates to make it really interesting.'

Soon afterwards came another trip to Italy, engineered yet again by Livorness. 'As a founder member of the Open Gate,' he says, 'I was asked to suggest a dance band for the club and naturally enough suggested Django's quintet. Thus it was that Django returned to Rome, after a year's absence, in the spring of 1950.'

Ekyan, who was with Django, has a few comments to make about the engagement. 'The Open Gate,' he declares, 'is the famous club frequented by the Rome upper set. You can imagine the kind of egg we laid with an aristocratic clientele like that! There was a little Italian mickey-mouse band there with us, but it knew just what had to be done to please the audience and did it to perfection. Hardly anyone paid us any attention when we were on the stand, and I got the impression that even a musician of Django's stature went unnoticed!

'Mind you, I'd half expected that would happen, because when we arrived the manager's wife had made some rather dubious remarks.

"Ah, Monsieur Ekyan!" she exclaimed. 'I'm so pleased to see you! We had an absolutely dreadful time with the last band! We just couldn't wait for them to leave!'

"Oh, yes? And whose was it?"

"Svend Asmussen's!"

'When I told Django about this, he looked pretty black. We knew what we were in for right enough.'

Livorness takes exception to Ekyan's account. 'I don't agree with Ekyan,' he protests. 'Agreed, the management made a mistake when it had the quintet play at dinner. It certainly wasn't the best time of day for concentrated listening; but more than once I heard regulars express great enthusiasm for the group. Besides, if the band didn't get a lot of attention from the diners, there were any number of people who came to the bar again and again, just to hear Django. I was always running into friends who said how much they'd enjoyed the nights they'd spent at the Open Gate.

'The quintet had already been at the Open Gate for a few days when Django got me to write to his wife to ask her to come to Rome. While I was typing Django looked on admiringly. He couldn't understand how I could go so fast without looking at the keyboard.

"However do you get the right letters?"

"And however do you get the right notes?"

"I see what you mean."

‘One day when we were strolling about the streets of Rome after a recording session, I took Django along to the Greco for a drink. The Greco is a well-known literary café. Since 1760 it has seen famous writers, conspirators and politicians pass through its doors. As we entered, the *maitre d’hotel* recognized Django and immediately went to fetch the book of gold which contains the inscriptions of all the notabilities who have patronized the establishment.

‘Monsieur Django Reinhardt,’ he asked, ‘perhaps you would do us the honour...’

‘And since Django couldn’t write very easily, he found a blank page and made a little sketch that he signed ‘Django Reinhardt’. If I remember right, it was of a caravan.’

When Django returned from Rome, it was to learn that Benny Goodman was about to arrive in Paris. The American band-leader was due to give a concert in the Palais de Chaillot, and had made known his desire to be introduced to the guitarist. Django went to welcome him at the station and was also present at the rehearsal the following afternoon. Benny asked him whether he was interested in going back to the States with the band and invited him to play at the concert that evening. Django was evidently unable to refuse, but he was worried about what he would be given. In the end he omitted to come.

Rarely was he seen in Paris now. He had hung up his guitar in the back of his van and seldom took it down to play.

‘When Gerard Leveque wished to engage him for a broadcast with Jacques Helian’s band he had the greatest difficulty in tracking him down. Through some gipsies he discovered that Django was living in his caravan near Le Bourget. Vuillermain was looking after Helian’s band at the time and Helian sent him along.

‘It’s all right with me,’ Django told him, ‘so long as Leveque comes and works out the scores with me.’

‘Early one morning,’ Leveque tells us, ‘I drove off with Vuillermain. I told him that on no account must he leave me alone with Django, because if that happened I should never get away.

‘His caravan was in a gipsy encampment. His mother was living in an old Citroen that had been fitted out as a van and beside it was Django’s caravan, a real beauty, I must say! We found Django in a large shed nearby where he was busy building a new caravan. There he was, sawing up planks

and planing them down, not according to any plan mind you, but following the gipsy traditions.

‘Django left his work just as it was and we chattered on about everything under the sun except the scores. And the broadcast was due to take place that very afternoon. Meanwhile Django had taken a fat roll of banknotes out from beneath his pillow. He gave his wife one or two of them so that she could go and get a chicken and some bottles of wine.

‘‘You must stay and eat with us now,’ he insisted.

‘But still a word hadn’t been said about music and the minutes were ticking by. Finally, about half-past one, Django took down his guitar.

‘It was ages since he’d played it. It was covered with dust and the strings were dull and rusty. I just had time to note down the chief melodic lines of *Double Whisky* that he played me. It was a good job I was used to working with him.

‘Since I was already late for the rehearsal I left hurriedly after giving Django the address and telling him not to come later than three o’clock. When I arrived at the studio I just had time to give the necessary indications to the other arranger, who was already installed in his sound-proof room. He had to prepare a fairly simple arrangement as quickly as possible. As for Django, he arrived in state at five o’clock! Naturally enough, it had been impossible to put the second arrangement together, which is why the second number was recorded by a small group featuring Ernie Royal and the rhythm section. After the broadcast, Django went back to Le Bourget. I was never to see him again.’

In point of fact little was heard of Django until February 1951, when he made a comeback as the star attraction at the Club Saint-Germain. He found himself in the midst of young jazzmen who may have lacked wide experience but who were passionately concerned with the new trends. It may well be that Django felt a little out of his element, not so much from the purely musical standpoint as by virtue of the fact that he was working with musicians who were far younger and regarded him somewhat in the light of a patriarch. ‘I saw little of Django about that time,’ says Ekyan, ‘but I had the impression that there was something amiss. I believe his last few years were bitter ones. Whenever I met him he always seemed to be worried about something or other. There’s no doubt about it, with those new ideas jazz had taken a step forward. And there was the rub. For twenty years Django had towered head and shoulders above his contemporaries.

And then, after a few years away from the scene, it was suddenly brought home to him how much everything had altered. Not only were the musicians themselves different; their outlook and above all their musical conceptions had changed out of all recognition.'

Pierre Fouad makes haste to add to these remarks of Ekyan's. 'In spite of everything,' he insists, 'Django was happy, because he was playing in a style that was different from the one he'd been used to.'

"Oh, yes," he said at the start, 'they give me a bad time now and again, these little kids who think it's all happening, that we're no good anymore, that we're finished! But one day I got angry;

I began to play so fast they couldn't follow me! And I gave them some new numbers to play, with difficult sequences. And there again they were all at sea! They've got some respect for me now!'

'I believe Django found a pleasure in playing at the club that he hadn't known for a long time,' claims Raymond Fol. 'Up to then, I must say, he'd been given some bad advice by second-rate managers, who didn't know a thing about music or the entertainment business, and were only concerned with fixing him up with a job, regardless of how they did it or what it was going to be like.'

'For instance,' interposes Hubert Fol, 'I can remember the shows he took part in with Eddie Bernard and me at the Theatre des Champs Elysées. The least that can be said is that they were as painful for us as they were for the public'

'It was a real relief for him to play at the club,' Raymond Fol goes on. 'And the chief lesson we learned from him during his stint there, had to do with the total freedom with which he expressed himself. Some evenings he was really fantastic; more, perhaps, because of the liberties he allowed himself to take – and only he could have got away with them – than because of the ideas he hit upon. Agreed, he was no band-leader, and his amplifier was always going wrong, but he was a *personality*. He had his own way of playing his own changes...even for the American tunes he didn't know and unconsciously fitted up with a harmonic sequence after his own lights.'

'I can remember he had a great affection for my brother. I'd even go so far as to say he admired him. Perhaps it was something different from admiration, confidence maybe, the same kind of feeling he'd had for Stéphane Grappelly.'

‘A small yet rather amusing point, and one I often think of, is that when he had something important to say he always spoke very quietly, as though it were a great secret.’

At the Club Saint-Germain, then, we find a man transfigured, driven on by the sacred flame of his youth, by this need to express himself, to renew himself, that for a while had deserted him. He seemed to be born anew. As Emile Savitry points out, Django had grown up at last. A punctual and assiduous performer now, he had once more given up his caravan and was staying with his family in the Hôtel Crystal across the street from the club. He was really happy to be working for an appreciative audience.

Every night his playing was a source of joy and amazement to enthusiasts and musicians alike. And, as in bygone days, his fellow gipsies used to hang about outside the club, kneeling down by the ventilator to listen to the sounds of his guitar that came up from the famous cellar.

There follows a selection of anecdotes relating to the period. Chosen at random, they are nonetheless characteristic in their different ways.

Livorness has the first word. ‘As part of a European survey it had instituted,’ he recalls, ‘the Italian broadcasting system was sending a recording van the length and breadth of the continent. I suggested to the people in charge that they should take advantage of their stay in Paris to do a programme on the clubs in the Faubourg Saint-Germain. I was given a completely free hand. After the Vieux Colombier and the Pergola we visited the Club Saint-Germain.

‘Django was there and agreed to my recording his performance. While he was improvising on *The Man I Love* one of his strings broke; I believe it was the B string. Quite unperturbed, he went on playing as though nothing had happened. It didn’t seem to have the slightest effect on his melodic development.’

Eugene Véés, otherwise known as Ninine, recalls another incident. ‘After he’d played at the club one night Django asked us along for a beer at the Pigalle. It was about four or five in the morning. I had a big American car. You know what Django was like. He was always a bit offhand.

‘If you let me drive, I’ll come back with you,’ he said.

‘Go ahead then,’ I replied.

‘My car was kicking up quite a din. There was something wrong with the exhaust. Just as we were taking the corner by the Gaumont in the Place Clichy two traffic cops flagged us down. They ordered us to put our hands

up and asked to see our papers. I had mine all right but Django couldn't find his.'

'That's to say,' interposes Django's wife, 'that he had them but wasn't going to show them!

"Who do you take us for? Al Capone?" Django exclaimed.

"Don't take any notice of him," I said. 'He's had one or two drinks. I expect his papers are in his other jacket. That's my husband, Django Reinhardt, you know.'

"What's that you say? Django who?"

"Django Reinhardt."

"He's Django Reinhardt, is he? Well, let's have a look at his hand and we'll soon see whether he's Django Reinhardt or not."

'Django wasn't too keen on showing his hand, but I grabbed it.

"See for yourself."

"You're right enough, he's no need of an identity card with that hand!" averred the traffic cop, smiling now that he was satisfied his leg wasn't being pulled.

'Thanks to that hand of Django's we were able to drive on without further ado.'

Around that time an event took place which probably served to stimulate Django. His friend Nepo took him along to the Palais de Chaillot to see Yvette Chauvire's ballet, *Mystere*; the choreography was based on Bela Bartok's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*. Django was deeply moved and left the hall on the verge of tears. This particular incident, like his attitude to the job in the Club Saint-Germain, was typical of Django's preoccupations at the time. Free once more, he had found a new zest for life and music. He was discovering new possibilities, contemplating new compositions. When the engagement at the Club Saint-Germain came to an end, he went on to play the summer season at the Knokke Casino. To be sure, he was often seen at the gaming tables, but for once in a while fate was kind to him. On the last night he almost broke the bank and drove back to Paris by taxi!

The following months found him living quietly in a little house at Samois, near Fontainebleau, on the picturesque banks of the Seine. Here he spent his days fishing or playing billiards. It was only for the occasional broadcast or recording session that he came to Paris now. He had assembled

a wonderful collection of fishing rods of every imaginable kind. Every morning before sunrise his punt would slide out into the river mists.

One evening when he was making his way home, accompanied by his brother-in-law, a waterman asked if he had had a good catch.

‘Yes,’ Django replied. ‘What do you think of this one?’

And he showed him the hook that had caught in his brother-in-law’s ear, forcing him to follow Django like a dog on a lead.

Rarely was it that the angler of Samois strayed far from the banks of the Seine, but amongst the occasions when he was unfaithful to them, one or two merit comment. On January 20, 1952, for instance, he played at one of the weekly concerts staged at the Theatre des Galeries in Brussels by the Belgian Hot Club. His quintet comprised Roger Guerin, Hubert Fol, Barney Spieler and Pierre Lemarchand. It was a poor audience. To be frank, the concert went down none too well, and Django knew it. He seemed depressed, no doubt musing nostalgically upon the time when thousands crowded into the great hall of the Beaux-Arts to hear him play. Nevertheless, he turned in an excellent performance, as the report of the concert plainly shows:

‘It is above all in the harmonic sphere that the modern school has influenced Django’s style. Reinhardt has always been a harmonist of genius. He knows exactly how to choose the most audacious note in the chord without sacrificing correctness and balance. Thanks to the power of the electric guitar, this technique reaches the listener’s very spinal cord, inducing sensations that lie beyond the realm of music proper. A perfect example of this is afforded by his double-stop chorus in *Yesterdays*’ (J.P., Hot Club Magazine, *Jazz Hot*, March 1952).

In January 1953, Django played an engagement at the Ringside, and met the Jazz at the Philharmonic promoter, Norman Granz, backstage at the Alhambra. He recorded a long-playing album for him to serve as an introduction for a tour that was planned for the autumn and was to include the USA, Japan and Europe. Meanwhile, his engagement at the Ringside over, he appeared once again in Brussels.

‘On Saturday, February 28, 1953,’ recalls Willy de Cort, the President of the Belgian Hot Club, ‘Django appeared with his quintet, which included Hubert Fol, at a ball given by the Grands Magasins de la Bourse. The day after, Dizzy Gillespie was to be featured in a concert at the Theatre Royal des Galeries. When I went along that day to the Hotel Central-Bourse to

wish my good friend Django all the best, it suddenly occurred to me to present him as a guest at the concert. He began by refusing, claiming that he was still tired after the previous night's dance, which was fair enough. But when I mentioned that Dizzy Gillespie was appearing at the concert, his face lit up at once.

“I mustn't miss that,” he exclaimed. “I've admired Dizzy for ages, but I've never really played with him. I don't even know him very well.”

“A few minutes later he was dressed and ready. He took his guitar and we left for the theatre.”

“With *Perdido*, we were pleasantly surprised to see Django Reinhardt and Hubert Fol come on to the stage. Django was in brilliant form and delighted everybody, including Dizzy, who seems to have a great regard for him. Almost at the start Django broke a string, but this only left us wondering what possible use it could have been, for his solo grew richer as it went on. *S'wonderful* featured a guitar-trumpet chase that showed these two musicians to be of the same exceptional class” (Jean Louis Scali, *Jazz Hot*, April 1955).

Evil days, alas, were on their way. During a tour of Switzerland, Django began to complain of severe headaches. It was thought his blood pressure was too high and he was advised to see a doctor, but needless to say, he did nothing of the kind.

“I don't know what's the matter with my fingers,” he told his wife when he played in Basle, “I don't seem to be able to close them properly.” Naguine pressed him to take medical advice. “No, I'm not seeing any doctors,” he insisted. “They're too handy with the needle!”

“We spent a fortnight in Switzerland,” says Naguine. “We'd met up with some gypsies and since we'd managed to get hold of a caravan we took to the road with them. Every time we stopped Django took time out to do some fishing.

“He seemed content. And he was a lot more serious. He'd given up cards and gambling. He said nobody understood him any more. But he'd accepted that and preferred to lead a quiet life away from it all.

“He claimed too that luck was no longer on his side, and in fact that's just how it turned out. When we got back to France we learned that Bing Crosby had done his level best to get in touch with Django while we were in Switzerland. Crosby wanted to take him back to America with him.”

Now, however, it was too late, and events were moving quickly. Back in Samois – it was May 15, 1953 – Django was obviously delighted to see the banks of the Seine, his friends and all his fishing gear once again. After he'd spent an hour or two down by the river, he made his way along to the café' and was sitting there gaily chatting away with the regulars when he was seized with a stroke. They took him back to the house.

It was a Saturday and they had a good deal of trouble finding a doctor. When one eventually arrived it was already too late. Django, who always had a sarcastic side to his character, looked him ironically in the eye.

'You've come now, have you?' he said.

These, it seems, were his last words.

He was moved at once to the hospital at Fontainebleau, but died during the night. He was only forty-three years old.

Photo's



Django and his family, 1920. His mother is second from the left, Django second from the right.



Django and his banjo-guitar, 1923.



Cannes, 1932. From left to right: Django has his arms raised, Savitry is last but one and Joseph is on the right.



Django's mother, 1939.



La Boite a Matelots (Paris), 1933. From left to right: Pierre Ferret, Lucian Galopain, unknown violin, Guérino, Christian Fauré, Django and probably Meneghi Guérino.



The first photo of the quintet, 1934. From left to right: Stéphane Grappelly, Roger Chaput, Django, Joseph. Second row: Louis Vola and Bert Marshall.



Django, 1936.



The quintet in London: Stéphane Grappelly, Eugène Vées. Roger Grasset, Django and Joseph Reinhardt.



Django and Jack Platt in the AFN studios, 1943. Bob Decker on bass and Larry Mann on piano.



Django painting, 1947.



Django, Babik and Naguine, 1944.



Django and his son, 1949.



Django at the Club Saint Germain, 1951. At the back Pierre Michelot and Pierre Lemarchand.



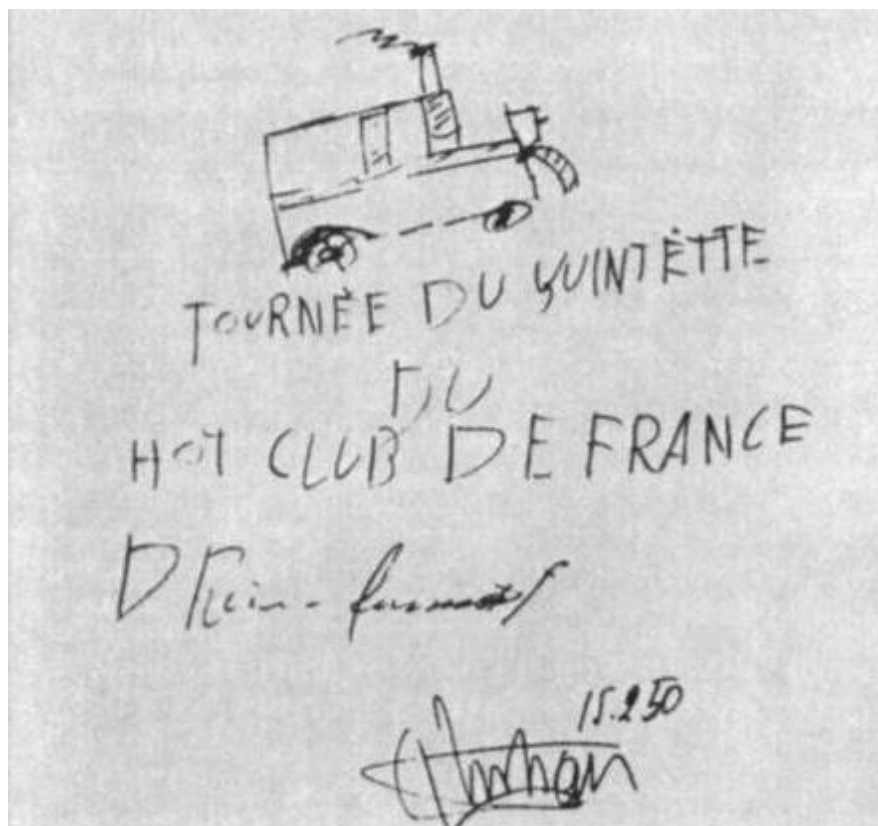
Django Reinhardt and Stéphane Grappelly, 1948.



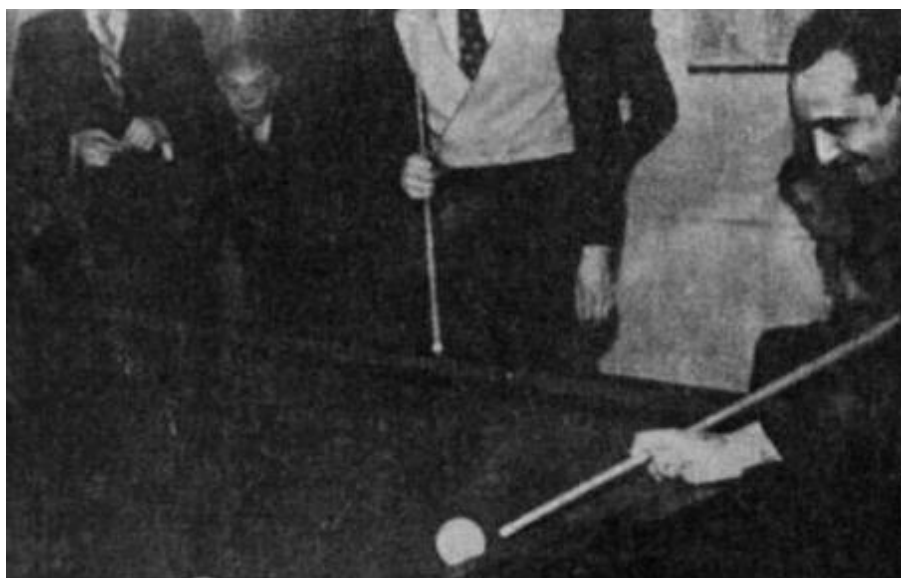
Django at the Club Saint-Germain, 1951. From left to right: Bernard Peiffer, Pierre Lemarchand, Hubert Fol, Pierre Michelot, Django, Raymond Fol and Bernard Hullin.



Django and Dizzy Gillespie in Brussels, 1952.



Django's autograph, Rome, 1950.



Django playing billiards at Samois, 1952.



Django at Samoia, 1955.

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